

Backhanded Hospitality
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Matthew 22:1-14

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Have you ever wondered about your salvation? Have you ever wondered if you are saved? The question may be understood differently for different people. Some may worry about salvation in the after life; are you going to heaven? Some may wonder about salvation in the here and now; are you living a life worth living? Regardless, have you ever wondered if you are saved? Have you ever found yourself waking up in the middle of the night, caught in a kind of existential angst, akin to St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* worrying and wondering if you are slated for heaven, hell, or nothing?

Maybe this question came out of an interfaith discussion, sitting at a table with Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Maybe someone asked you, why be a Christian and not a Jew? And all of a sudden your mouth opens, but words fail to come out. You try to answer, but you begin to wonder, what if they are right and I am wrong. Maybe you've been at that point where you really do wonder if you are saved. It is that nagging, that moment when you open your eyes to the possibilities of life and see the chaos that could be if you are wrong. It is possible that things might not be so clear cut as you would like, things may not be as sure as you would like, and you begin to wonder if you are saved. Have you ever been at that place where you truly wonder about your salvation?

It is a risky thing to wonder, and perhaps we would rather not take that risk. Perhaps we don't want to shake our foundations that much, we don't want to know if we have it wrong, so let's play ignorant and keep going as if the question never came up. The anxiety might cause too much distress, might shake up the boat a little too much, and might make people leave. It is like when you are replacing your carpet, and you have the chance to see how your floors really are – do you really want to know. Or in the movie *Jaws*, after the second shark attack, hoards of people try to hunt down the shark using every possible method. After two or three days, some fishermen think they have found the shark which had plagued the townspeople and caused so much fear. The fishermen hang the shark for all to see, and to assure all that salvation is granted. The townspeople are elated, everyone feels safe and assume that the trouble is passed; except for one person who wants to make sure. No one else wants to know, because what if they aren't safe, what if they are wrong? That is how it can be for us all. Let's stay in our surety and our stubbornness and assume, and know that indeed we are saved.

Maybe, instead of questioning our state of salvation, we can think of a different question, a different challenge that we can find in the parable Jesus shares with those around him. Instead of asking if you are saved, this parable asks, “are you listening to God?” Now granted, this is a lengthy parable, with many facets and there is no one clear message. Jesus is telling this parable he has already turned over tables in the temple, he has already drawn the line in the sand with the Pharisees, even accusing them of acting like tenants of previous parables who have killed God's messengers. He has placed himself against the leaders of the temple. Remember, when Jesus is telling this parable, he is talking to a group of religious leaders who think they are saved; no, they *know* they are saved, and are resting on their arrogance! Jesus tells them this parable of insiders cast out, of those who stopped listening to God so there is much depth and richness in this parable. But let's consider those who stopped listening to God.

This parable is timeless. It could be speaking of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Joel, Amos, and all those prophets who came to the people and challenged their salvation. Prophets who came in a time when the ruling Hebrew religion, the religion of the establishment was complacent, sure of their salvation. They had built

their temple, they had their king and priests, and things were going well. These prophets came and asked, “Are you listening to God?” They saw oppression, social injustice, and arrogance. They came with an invitation in their hand calling all to the banquet where the orphans, the widows, the poor were served, where God’s glory was known and experienced. They came with an invitation to the life that God called the people to live, and asked “are you listening to God?” And they were martyred, ignored, mocked and beaten. Did not the same happen to Jesus when he suggested that the people were indeed not listening to God? The strict adherence to the law, the pandering to Roman officials, and the over-taxation are not actions of ones who are listening to God.

This parable is timeless, for we have again and again assumed our salvation and stopped listening to God. The servants came with the invitation to the conforming churches of Germany during World War II. These were churches that supported Hitler’s regime, ideology, and methods. The servants like Bonhoeffer came with an invitation to the churches to return to the life, the banquet the God had prepared. A place where the pacifist, the Jew, the catholic, the Pole, the weak, the sick, and all others were welcome and held as honored guests. But the servants were mocked, beaten, ignored and martyred. The conforming churches of Germany assumed their salvation and stopped listening to God.

This parable is timeless for we have again and again assumed our salvation and stopped listening to God. The servants came with the invitation offered to the white churches of the South and the North during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s in the United States. Have you read this invitation from the hand of Martin Luther King Jr. written from that Birmingham jail. He was calling other ministers to listen to God, to respond to God’s invitation to the banquet where white and black, Hispanic and Asian; all of God’s children are invited. He represented a host of servants bringing a message, but they were ignored, mocked, beaten and martyred. The churches of the South and of the North assumed their salvation and stopped listening to God.

This parable is timeless for we have again and again assumed our salvation and stopped listening to God. We have assumed that everything is fine and we can live our lives as normal. We can be swept up in popular church trends, national trends, cultural trends and assume that everything is fine. Yet it is so easy to stop listening to God, to stop looking for the invitation and assume that we are saved. It is like the music has become so loud from our celebration that we can no longer hear the servant knocking on the door calling us back to the life God has intended. Martin Luther described the distractions as honor, worldly affairs, and the arrogance of prudence. Are we to honor bound to question our own salvation? Are we so enmeshed in worldly affairs to question our own salvation? Are we to “wise” to question our own salvation? It is a risky thing to wonder and question, and honestly we would rather not. But do we want to take that risk?

So let me ask you, are you listening to God? For God is calling to you, inviting you. Do you hear the grace in this parable? The king sends his servants out again to everyone; the good and the bad, the Jew and the Gentile, the rich and the poor, the highly educated and the high school educated, the man and the woman – the invitation is extended to all people to come to God’s banquet, to God’s celebration and revelation of Jesus Christ. This parable is timeless and rich in its allegory for we all can respond to the invitation and offer it to all others. So have you said “yes” to Christ? Have you asked for a place at the table, a seat in the hall, to be expected at the banquet? The invitation is there before us, will you accept it.

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal put it as a wager, a Divine Wager, as he called it. Basically, the invitation is before you. You could say “yes,” and follow God, or say “no” and go your own way. If you take a chance with the “yes,” and find there is no God, but you will have lost nothing. But if you say “no” and find there is a God who desires kindness, love and mercy, then you may have lost everything. In a sense that is the initial decision that is before us all, and it is the decision we extend to all, to make that initial “yes” to Christ, to say yes to the invitation. The invitation has been extended to all, it is offered to all, will you accept it with that favorable “yes?” Will you say, “Yes I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, as God incarnate, the Son of God.” Will you read all the scriptures with that statement, will you view the cross with that belief, and will you join this movement of Christianity with the understanding that you follow a living God? Will you say “yes” to the invitation? Will you take that wager that you are indeed saved through the grace of God?

Now, let me ask you again, are you saved? You see, in this parable, all those whom the servants went to initially said “yes” to the invitation. That was how banquets worked back then, you would receive a “heads up” invitation and you would be summoned when the banquet was going to occur. So saying yes at first is right and good, but it does not stop there. We have to keep listening to God because we are going to receive that

invitation again and summoned to the banquet again. This is the second half of Pascal's Divine Wager. Sure, take the risk, take the chance and say yes, but then live out that "yes." Show others that you have been invited to the banquet through your actions. This isn't showy, it isn't pompous, but humble. We are to live our faith. There is a common adage that goes, "share the love of Jesus Christ and use words if necessary." This is responding again and again to the invitation with our actions and our lives. Maybe Christ comes to us, maybe Christ's servants and asks us to say yes to Christ in the homeless shelter. Maybe we are called to say yes to Christ at the soup kitchen. Maybe we are called to say yes to Christ in those parts of Philadelphia where people are afraid to God.

Maybe we are called to say yes again and again to Christ in this neighborhood. Not be being a pretentious, "main line" church. Not by offering well dressed, nicely pressed Christians, but by offering that very community which has been invited – a

community of inclusivity, a community of passion, and a community that is dedicated to the Lord. Can we live out our "yes?"

Now you can ask the question, "are you saved." If you are resting on your arrogant assurance that you must be saved, then you don't want to ask this question again and again. But if you are trying to live out your faith, if you are constantly asking yourself how you can act out your yes, how you can actively follow Christ, then the question is not so threatening. Because the answer can be "let me listen to God and God's servants." Are you saved – ask God, and listen. Are you following Christ – ask God and listen. What a prayer, what a powerful pray to give up so much that you place your very salvation in God's hands. But rest in that assurance that as Luther says, "Christ's righteousness is incomparably stronger than my sin," and through your desire to be with Christ, you will find rest in the arms of God. (Sermon) Luther goes further to describe living the Christian life as sin forced between the hammer and the anvil. What an image! To think that as you live out your "yes," that you sin is being pounded again and again until it is no more. That is the grace of God! Are you saved, and are you living out that salvation, that grace, that invitation, that holy yes to God?

Live it out, keep listening to God, for the invitation to the great banquet in the sky will some day occur in the here and now. There will be that day when the messengers, when the servants knocking at your door aren't other Christians, but the heavenly host proclaiming the Day of the Lord. There will be that time when God calls us all to sit at the table in a new heaven and a new earth. There will be that time when Christ will come dancing down the streets, choosing those who had said "yes," and have lived out that yes. This is the power and the joy of the parable – that the wedding garment, the clothes are given and worn through our faith. The early church theologian Irenaeus described this garment as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit which has washed upon us, which cleanses us, which leads us and changes us, and makes us shine in the eyes of God. That is the garment which Christ looks for at his holy banquet. Now will our works matter – will they make a difference. Yes and no. What matters is your relationship with Christ, and nothing can get in the way of that relationship. So, no your works wont make a difference in your salvation. Yet at the same time they will. For our garments can become worn and tattered if we do not care for them. The sheen will diminish, the glow will decrees if we do not follow the call of the Holy Spirit, and live out our faith. For what are we saying about our faith in Christ if we do not live our faith? That is the backhanded hospitality, to say "yes" to Christ but never follow through with that yes. No, instead let us continue to be vigilant, let us continue to listen for Christ for he will walk by, touching people, choosing those who have been called. Pass me not, we cry! Pass me not my gentle savior, hear my humble cry! Cry out to Christ, live for Christ and you will know that you are indeed saved.

AMEN