

“The difference that matters ...”

October 12, 2008

Text: Matthew 22:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9

I.

The great **Mahatma Gandhi**, who brought transforming change to his native India, once urged his followers:

Be the difference you want to see in the world.

That’s the essence of the message this morning ... for all of us: ***be the difference we want to see in the world.***

Don’t we all want to *make a difference* in this life? Certainly, with our families ... but also in the work place ... in community life? Don’t we want to *make a difference*? Doing whatever we can to make things better?? I think we do.

The Christian life is about calling people to faith; it’s about calling people into a relationship with God and into an awareness of how God has acted in Jesus Christ.

And the critical event for each of us in all of this is our Baptism.

- In our Baptism we are reborn, reconstituted, renewed and redirected.
- In our Baptism, we are drawn in to the body of Christ that is the Church.
- In our Baptism, we make a personal decision about a particular way of life.
- It’s a *way of life* that makes all the difference. Why? Because it’s *a way of life* given to us by Jesus; and it’s all about compassion and forgiveness and generosity and sacrificial love.

When we become Christians and choose to live out our Christian faith with the conviction and passion rooted in our Baptism, our lives become ***the difference that matters***. The point being: our lives make a difference. Why? Because we ourselves have been changed. We’ve been made different in our Baptism.

And that’s the point of it all: that we be changed. Changed to where we have new eyes, new ears, and a new spirit with which to embrace the world.

II.

In our parable from **Matthew’s** gospel this morning of *The Wedding Banquet*, a king (symbolizing God) gives an extravagant wedding banquet for his son (obviously, symbolic of Jesus).

Small problem: none of the invited guests (referring to Israel) ... none of them come, even after being reminded by the king's helpers. A marvelous feast is ready for them—to no avail. They've all got some excuse. And worse yet, some of them get together and begin abusing, even killing the king's helpers.

When the king learns of this, he sends his troops out to destroy the perpetrators of these awful acts; and then, to fill the banquet hall, he sends more of his helpers out to invite in whomever they run into, bad and good alike. And soon, the wedding hall is overflowing with guests.

Then there's a strange twist to the story. When the king shows up at the banquet, he's stunned to see that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. Immediately put off by this *apparently clueless guest*, he has him thrown out of the party into the darkness.

For us outsiders, we wonder what's going on? It all seems grossly unfair and a huge over-reaction on the part of the king.

It turns out, as we might expect, that the parable is an allegory and that the *wedding garment* is like a *baptismal robe*, symbolic of the Christian life. The wedding party was in fact an extravagant *baptismal* celebration. It's extravagant in every way because of the significance of Baptism in the Christian life. It means everything; because in our Baptism, we die to the world and are reborn in Christ.

In other words, while everyone is invited to the party, you'd better be dialed in to what the purpose of the party is because if you're not, you're not only going to *feel* out of place, you *are* out of place.

In many ways, this is a typical parable of Jesus—with a sense of urgency and passion and a riveting nudge of commitment.

III.

So here's the situation: everyone is invited to this heavenly banquet (always, our faith has a universal ring to it) ... but not everyone comes. And more, still, not everyone knows how to behave once they get there. There's stuff at stake at this banquet. We've gotta be awake and alive to the tug of the Spirit. God's has things God wants to do through us.

If you're attending the party, it's assumed you're going to be clothed in the appropriate robe because it's assumed you're going to be baptized. You wouldn't be there otherwise. Jesus' point: this is a BIG deal.

In other words (the gospel of Matthew's point), Christ IS **the difference that matters**.

This symbolism of the *wedding garment* or, *baptismal robe* appears other places in the writings of Paul.

1. In **Ephesians 4** ...*You were taught to put away your former way of life ...and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God ...*
2. In **Colossians 3** ... *As God's holy ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.*

In clothing ourselves, we *put on* Christ. We *put on* compassion and kindness, humility and patience.

3. And then, in **Galatians 3** ... *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek ... no longer slave or free ... no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

When we *clothe* ourselves with Christ ... when we put on our *wedding garment*, or *baptismal robe*, we're signing on to a new way of life; a life where we see our personal lives and the world around us differently. In the process—for sure—we become a bigger person. A person who sees the BIG PICTURE of our lives ... and the BIG PICTURE of the world around us as well.

The problem with the banquet guest who wasn't wearing a *wedding robe* was that he didn't know what time it was. He had no sense of what God had done for him in Christ. No sense of the abundant grace that was flowing at the party; no sense of awe and wonder.

The other guests—upon arriving—are immediately overcome with humility—quickly trading in their street clothes for the festive *wedding robes*. But he doesn't get it. **The difference that matters** has eluded him.

IV.

Friends, in the grip of these unbelievably challenging times ... times like we've never seen in my life time (and I'm not getting any younger), our communities and our nation are desperate for leadership—on all levels of community and national life ... leadership that can become *the difference that matters*.

I was deeply moved by a story in an *opinion column* by **Leonard Pitts Jr.** that appeared a little over a year ago in the Miami Herald.

It's about the transformation of **East Lake Meadows**, a formerly run down, crime ravaged area of Atlanta. To many at the time, East Lake seemed like a war zone. Check out these daunting numbers:

Crime – 18 times the national average
Per family income - \$4,000 a year

60% of the households on welfare

75% dropout rate in the schools

The average family could expect to be the victim of an average of three felonies a year

Only 5% of the children could pass the state math test

The *employment* rate (not unemployment) was 14%

That was all before the ***East Lake Foundation*** was launched by **Tom Cousins**, a wealthy developer and frustrated philanthropist. Stunned by a New York Times report that 70% of the men in the state's prison system came from just eight neighborhoods in the city, when he checked into it, he found it was the same in Atlanta. Thus, the beginning of what became known as Cousins' massive mission project to transform hell.

You should see **East Lake** now, some years later: everything's changed. New construction everywhere: apartment buildings, schools, recreation facilities and playgrounds ... a total overhaul ... along with all kinds of education and training programs as well.

One half of the apartments are rented out to middle-income people at market value. The other half are rented to low-income people who, no matter their income, pay only thirty percent of what they earn for rent. This integration of middle-income families with the low-income families has proven to be one of the keys to the success of the project.

Check out the numbers now:

74% of the kids now pass the state math test

Crime is down 87%, violent crime down 95%

Just 5% of the residents are on welfare ... all of them elderly or disabled

Per family income is now at \$18,000 a year

What's it all about? It's about hope—giving people hope in the midst of an utter despair and discouragement. And it's about being **the difference that matters** wherever and whenever we can.

Again, too, it's about leadership ... leadership that has been to the wedding banquet and understands how the grace of God can change lives (one life at a time) ... and change the world (one day at a time).

The difference that matters sees the world through the eyes of the sacrificial love of Christ which—always—with a loving, giving spirit, sees the good in every human being and understands the importance of granting every person basic dignity and self-respect.

Gandhi's words sound out: *Be the difference you want to see in the world!*

V.

Sacrificial love is *the way* of God's Christ. It's what our Baptism leads us to. And it is fueled by a passion and a spirit that is relentless. Why? Because it can't help itself. That's what *sacrificial love* does. It reaches out, seeking always to build up ... to make things better ... always, keeping the BIG PICTURE in mind.

When we've been baptized, when we've been to the wedding banquet, put on the *baptismal robe*, clothed ourselves with Christ, it's a whole new day. We can do anything God calls us to do ... because the Spirit can't be held back.

There's a cute parable that makes this point:

Once upon a time there was a piece of iron which was very strong and very hard. Many attempts had been made to bend it and to mold it to a useful purpose ... but they failed.

I'll take care of it, said the axe ... and his blows fell heavily upon the piece of iron. But every blow only made the axe's edge more dull until, finally, it had to give up.

Leave it to me, said the saw ... and it worked back and forth on the iron's surface until it's jagged teeth were all worn and broken.

Ah, said the hammer, *I knew you two wouldn't be able to handle it. Let me have a go!* But after its first hard blow, its head flew off and the piece of iron remained, fully in tact.

Can I try? Asked the small flame of fire. *Forget it*, everyone said; *what can you do? You're too small and weak.* But the small flame curled around the iron, embracing it, persisting and persisting, not letting go ... until the piece of iron heated to the point where it gradually began to bend and bend until they could shape it to a useful purpose.

This flame is like the sacrificial love of Jesus. With warmth and intensity, it wraps itself around the challenges of the world, bringing change and transformation where it can.

VI.

It's up to us, friends, to be **the difference that matters** wherever and whenever we can. The way the love of Christ shines through you and me can change the world ... if we give it a chance ... and if we do our part.

The more we are able to live out our Baptism in this way, reaching out with a sacrificial love and in a sacrificial spirit, the more we can rejoice with Paul, as he rejoiced to the Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Friends, let's resolve—all of us—to be **the difference that matters.**

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com