

‘8 in 18’  
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper  
October 15, 2017  
based on Philippians 4:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-14

Last weekend I officiated a wedding at the Fairport UMC. The sanctuary was packed with overflow in the balcony. The standing ovation at the end of the ceremony was deafening. So much love in the room.

The reception was quite posh. Uniformed waiters and waitresses mingled through the party with trays of fried rice balls and cheesy bacon meatballs. Not nearly as good as Jean Stacey’s meatloaf, but pretty darn good!

There is nothing more fun than a good wedding and reception!

Today we heard a story about how a king organized a wedding and reception for his son only to be discouraged by people’s lack of interest in his son’s happy day. Excuse after excuse, the invited guests found other things to do rather than attend the Son’s wedding.

So the king orders his slaves to go out into the streets ... the neighborhoods ... and invite all to the banquet feast. They arrive in droves but the king notices one man was not wearing a wedding robe and the king orders him bound and gagged and thrown into the pit. The story ends with the words: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Please pray with me:

Awesome God, you have called us here to this place to not only worship, but to fully participate in the ministry and mission of Jesus. Thank you for your invitation to be full participants in awakening people to the transforming love of Jesus. Bless us and keep us ... in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

What are we to make of this story of invitation and rejection? Especially the part about the wedding robe??

First of all, the story isn’t actually about a piece of clothing, but about what a person wears in the heart that represents their willingness to fully participate in the wedding celebration.

By not wearing a wedding robe, the man reaped the benefits of the banquet, but does nothing to affirm the king and his gracious invitation.

As one commentator put it ... “It is not simply whether one says yes or no to the invitation. The invitation is most gracious; all are invited, both good and bad. But just because all are invited does not mean there are no standards, no expectations of the guests. A wedding garment (kingdom talk for new life, righteousness conduct) is expected.”

The invitation is grace ... grace that is freely given, but not to be cheapened with disregard.

In other words, you can't just come to the wedding feast for the cheesy bacon meatballs. You must bring your own gift to the king's son.

So how is it we live into the invitation of grace that brings comfort to the disheartened; peace to the conflicted; healing to those in pain; and grace to those in need of forgiveness?

Scripture tells us when we do not know how to pray as we ought; the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. When we do not know how to praise God as we ought Jesus is there to teach us how.

How do we know what is the best way to praise God? We opened worship with the phrase:

**The best praise is to deal justly with others.**

**Happiness is doing the right thing (righteous thing) all the time.**

Today's sermon title is: 8 in 18.

8 in 18 is based on the idea Covenant is a congregation of people who believe the best praise is to deal justly with others ... and who find happiness in doing the right thing all the time. Simply put: we are a congregation who gladly and enthusiastically wear the proper wedding attire ... and 8 in 18 is how we're going to live that out.

8 in 18 is not my idea ... it is the idea of people within the congregation who would like us to focus on 8 ministry initiatives in 2018 aimed at numerical growth and spiritual growth.

The only thing is ... I can't tell you what Initiatives to embrace. If I did that, then they would be my Initiatives, not yours. I would essentially be wearing your wedding robes! Everyone needs to wear their own robe.

The energy and passion for these Initiatives need to come from you. That's the secret to church growth ... when the congregation drives ministry ... not the pastor. That kind of energy and passion is a contagion. People who are infected with the love of Christ are bound to infect others.

When people are engaged in the ministry of the church and are committed to the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world ... the church grows. That's a fact.

Energy begets energy. Passion begets passion.

I'm going to ask you to put on your thinking caps and ignite your creative energy.

What ministry would you like to see us do (and we may be already doing) ... but also what we could be doing ... that demonstrates to the world we aren't just here for the cheesy

bacon meatballs ... but we are here to lift praise to God and share the happiness of Christ with all?

To give you an idea what an Initiative might look like, I've asked Rebecca Fuss to start by giving us an example of what her thoughts are ... where her passion and energy lies.

REBECCA: Mid-week Praise & Play

VALERIE: Caring Ministries

PAUL RACA: Use of Technology in Communicating the Gospel

CHRIS MCGOVERN Spirituality of Fundraising

JOHN CMELKO: Sharing the Faith ... Evangelism!

LINDA BRADY: Muffin Ministry

I'm going to share more next week about some ideas for Initiatives that a group of people came up with a few weeks ago. Before we unveil them, we wanted to know what your thoughts were. Think and pray about it this week, because I'll be asking again.

In last week's bulletin there was an announcement that Church Council is beginning serious conversation around our financial stewardship. (How we accomplish our ministry and mission with the financial resources we have available.)

You might be thinking we do this every year ... and we do! But this year is different because we have to face the fact we can no longer afford to be a church that survives because of a feeding tube attached to our investments. More importantly, we can no longer afford to be a church that does not *actively* seek to bring more people to Jesus.

Over the next few weeks we will connect our financial giving and our time priorities to our commitment to being Jesus followers whose primary job is to help others find Jesus.

Covenant is going to be making some radical changes to its fiscal realities over the next two years ... which is partly why embracing these 8 Initiatives in 2018 will be a vital part of our movement into the future. These Initiatives will drive our future!

We are in the business of being Jesus followers AND in helping others find Jesus. We are in the business of transforming lives.

Responding to grace is living fully into the righteousness of faith. That response helps others to know the best praise is to deal justly with others. Happiness is doing the right thing all the time.

The Apostle Paul wrote eloquently to the Philippians how their full participation in spreading the good news about Jesus would transform lives. He wrote:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,

whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

For us to enter into this covenant with God at God’s invitation is to put our faith and trust in Jesus ... and to obey his command to go and make disciples of all nations ... beginning with our own household.

May it be so! Amen.