

Children

If a friend of yours was drowning, would you throw him a rope or a rock? I heard about a girl named Sally who was having a real problem with her weight. One day she saw a friend of hers walking up the driveway. Sally said to her mother, "Linda's so skinny it makes me sick."

"If it bothers you," her mother said gently, "why don't you do something about it?"

"Good idea, Mom," Sally replied. Turning to her friend, she called out, "Hey, Linda, have a piece of chocolate cake."

What was Sally trying to do. She was trying to give Linda a weight problem like her own, wasn't she?

Sometimes people who say they are our friends try to get us to do things that are wrong. Or they try to get us to do something that is not good for us. Of the thousands of young people who die each year from addiction to drugs, many of them started because a friend got them to try a drug the first time. What a terrible thing to do to a friend. Jesus wants us to be the kind of people who throw our friends ropes, not rocks. He wants us to help lift others up, not help them go down. Remember that, if a friend tries to get you to do something you know is wrong or something you know is not good for you. He or she is no friend at all.

Dynamic Preaching, Collected Sermons, by King Duncan

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In his book *A Scent of Love* Keith Miller tells a hilarious true story about a mother back in the 1960s who took her children to an animal farm--a place where they could pet animals that roamed free . . . and even ride an elephant.

She put her kids in her Volkswagen Beetle (remember those?) and drove off to the animal farm. No sooner had they arrived than she discovered there wasn't a space left in the parking lot. She settled for an apron on the pathway by the ranger station. She and the children got out of the car and off they went to have some fun.

Hours passed all too quickly. Suddenly, Mom realized they would never be able to make it to the airport on time to pick up Dad if they didn't leave immediately. She and the children scurried away to the ranger station where their little VW was parked. Shock quickly covered the mother's face the instant she saw her car. In her words, "The front end of the car was just smushed."

Shock quickly turned to rage for this mother. Someone at the ranger station surely had an explanation. A ranger was already waiting for her at the door. Before she could utter a word, the ranger said, "Sorry ma'am . . . I know you are upset about your Beetle. We promise to make it up to you."

He then went on to explain what happened, "Mille our elephant has been trained to sit on a red tub. Well," he continued with faint hint of laughter in his voice, "Millie mistook your red Volkswagen for her red tub, so down she sat. But, don't worry--your car will be fixed if only you will give us some time."

Mom knew there was no time to wait for the car to be fixed. Fortunately, as you may know, the motor is in the rear of a Volkswagen Beetle, so the car was still drivable. The mother

hurriedly packed the kids into the “smushed” car, started it, put the pedal to the metal, as we say, and headed straight to the airport.

Before she got there, however, she ran into a traffic jam caused by a minor traffic accident. The best she could do now was to exercise patience. She tried as much as she could to stay calm but when she checked the clock she knew it was time she did something drastic. Off she drove on the shoulder of the freeway as she made her way around the traffic jam. As soon as she pulled around the obstructed traffic, she saw two officers. One was busy directing traffic and the other was writing an accident report. She acted as though she never saw them--all she cared about now was getting to the airport.

One of the officers looked up as her little red car zipped by. He ran to his motorcycle and followed her with siren screaming. When he pulled her over he said, “Look, lady, don’t you know it is against State law to leave the scene of an accident.”

She replied, “I haven’t been involved in any accident.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked at the front of her car and asked, “What happened to your car?”

She replied, “An elephant sat on it.”

That is when the officer brought out a little balloon for her to breathe into. (1)

If I had no better excuse than that an elephant sat on my car, I believe I would have kept quiet.

Jesus told a parable about a king who was throwing a marriage feast for his son. He sent out invitations to all his friends and other persons of prominence throughout the kingdom, but they did not come. Some did not even bother to respond to his invitation. Others made excuses. They said they were busy with the farm or at the office. Or maybe they began making excuses like “an elephant sat on my ox cart.”

The king sent out a second invitation. “Look,” he said almost pleading, “The dinner is ready. My oxen and my fat calves are killed. Come to the marriage feast.”

But his invitees made light of the invitation. Some even roughed up the king’s servants. When the king saw the way his intended guests responded to his invitation he was furious. Then he said to his servants, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited are not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

Some thoughts filled my head as I read this parable of our Lord. **The first is that a worship service ought to be something like a wedding feast.** Here we are gathered in the presence of the King of all Kings. The candles are lit; the flowers nicely arranged. The musicians have performed. We are not in formal attire, but this is as formal as some of us get. We have already greeted many good friends. There is a feeling of warmth and fellowship in this place. We have opened the Scriptures and broken the Bread of Life. The celebration has begun, and what a celebration it is! What are we celebrating? We are celebrating the King’s great love for His Son and for each of us.

We are not here because we deserve to be. We are here because of His gracious invitation. There is an old joke that you may have heard. Tell me if you have. The joke is about a small satellite that NASA put up that only beeps when it passes over a truly righteous man or woman. Have you heard it? No, I thought not.

Neither have I. It must not have passed over my head yet either.

Oh, some of us think we are here because we deserve to be. After all, we are not among those heathen who work on their yards on Sunday mornings, thank God, or worse yet, play golf. We are not those who are sleeping off hangovers or doing their religious duty by staying in bed and watching a glitzy televangelist. At least we deserve credit for getting up, showering and shaving, putting on our best clothes and finding our way to church. Those of you who have small children have already put in a full day's work, I know. You could have made excuses.

You have missed the whole point of the Gospel, however, if you think you are here because you deserve to be.

There is a story about a man who fell into a deep well. After falling down the slimy shaft into the cold water, his first thought was to cry for help. His calls didn't work.

Finally he began to try to climb. Again and again he tried to inch up the slippery, algae-covered brick, only to slide back into the water. His nails were bloodied from his attempts to get a grip in the cracks. He simply couldn't make it to the top before sliding back. He was stuck in the hole. Despairing, he called out again.

A passerby appeared above. "Well, I can't get you out of the well," he said, "But I can make it better for you. Here have something to drink." And so he passed a bottle of liquor down to the man at the bottom of the well, who drank it all. He grew quite drunk. The well didn't seem so bad. But when he sobered up he was still trapped in the well and was miserable. He called again. This time a woman appeared. "Well, she said, "I can't get you out of the well, but things could be much worse for you. You must accept your situation and make the best of it."

So the man in the well tried not to feel sorry for himself and to be grateful to be alive, but it didn't work. He was still miserable and alone, and despair maintained its grip on him. He started to climb again. He had always been able to take care of himself. But bloody, cold, and hungry now, he slid back into the water again.

Then another man appeared above. "I can get you out of the well," he said, "But you must trust me. Do you?"

The man in the well couldn't see how this man could get him out, but he said, "Yes, I'll trust you."

And Jesus Christ dropped into that well. Upon his shoulders the man climbed out while Christ remained in the man's place. (2)

That is not one man's story. It is the story of humanity. We are sinners. To say that is not to demean us. It is to say simply that we are all in the same boat. Without faith in Christ, we are estranged from God and one another.

As one theologian has described it, it is like several ship passengers who happen to get washed overboard in the mid-Atlantic. The reasons for slipping off the deck vary from individual to individual. As each one discovers his own plight and finds his companions are in the same cold water, however, it is meaningless to debate who is deserving and who is not. All are in the water. It doesn't make any difference whether one is traveling first-class or economy, whether one is religious or non-religious, even whether one is a good swimmer or not. The need is a total need.

That is our condition. There is no way that you and I can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and be what God would have us to be. We stand in the presence of God on the shoulders of Christ or not at all. The Gospel songwriter was right when he wrote, "Love lifted me, love lifted me; when nothing else could help, love lifted me." We are here not

because of what we have done but because of what Christ has done in our behalf. Doesn't that make you nearly delirious with joy?

If we understand that we are here simply and solely because of God's amazing grace, then we can center our worship where it really needs to be centered--on God.

Johann Sebastian Bach understood that. On almost all of his manuscripts Bach placed two sets of initials. At the end he wrote the letters, "S.D.G." and, at the beginning, "J.J." S.D.G., SOLI DEO GLORIA--to God alone be the glory. And J.J., JESU JUVET--Jesus, help me. (3) That sounds like a pretty good theme for worship: "Jesus help me," and "To God alone be the glory."

People who understand that we are not here because we deserve to be or because we have to be, do not have to make excuses on Sunday morning. We are not here in order to work our way to Heaven. We are here simply to say, "Thank you." We are here to sing the great hymns of faith not for our personal entertainment but as testimony of praise. "Oh, God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come . . ." "How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in His excellent word . . ." "O, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise . . ." We are here at a banquet given by a gracious and loving King, and we rise joyfully to sing his praise. That is what worship is about.

But there is one thing more: we have an assignment when we leave this hall. That is to go out into the highways and byways and find others who also don't deserve to be here but who need the King's blessings as much as we.

A very prominent and effective pastor retired a few years ago. He told how he came to the ministry.

When he was a little boy living in a small town, his mother sent him to Sunday school one Sunday. On the way he stopped by a drugstore to have a soft drink. While there, he decided he wouldn't go to Sunday school after all.

The boys in the class assembled, and the teacher looked around and asked, "Where's Roy?"

One of the boys ventured, "I bet he's down at the drugstore."

The teacher said, "You wait right here. I'm going after Roy."

He went into town, found Roy at the drugstore, and brought him to Sunday school.

Later, as a grown man, Roy Williams would say, "I owe my call to the ministry to a teacher who cared about me, who loved me enough to leave his Sunday school class to go in search of me, and bring me to class. Had it not been for that teacher, I would never have gone into the ministry." (4)

I hope each of our Sunday school teachers believes Sunday school is that important. Even more, I hope that they think little boys and little girls are that important.

The banquet is drawing swiftly to a close, but we have an assignment. Find boys and girls and teenagers and young families and middle aged adults and older adults, bring them all--saints and sinners, singles and couples, stock brokers and slackers, the homeless and the well-to-do, bicycles and BMWs, from every station and condition of life. It doesn't matter who they are or what they look like. It doesn't even matter whether we approve of them or not. All that matters is that Christ died for them--just as he died for us.

Enough said. Let's continue our celebration in honor of the King of the banquet who has brought us in from the highways and by-ways to be his guests. Amen.

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1. Keith Miller, *The Scent of Love* (Waco: Word Books, 1983).
 2. From a sermon by James E. Rimmer.
 3. John Killinger, *Christ in the Seasons of Ministry* (Waco: Word Books, 1981).
 4. Contributed. Source unknown.

Il Desiano

So you don't want to come to the party? Gee, I wonder why?

Oh, I see, you think you have a better offer. Really, how do you know? Yes, yes, there's lots going on, and people really want your attention. But you really still don't want to go to the party?

I'm not sure you realize what this party is about. It would be terrible if you had a great time on your farm or your other business but never really understood the invitation in the first place. You are being invited to a party that will change everything in your life. In fact, everything in the lives of all people. You are sure you don't want to come?

Yes, at your party there will be guests, a nice munchies, and perhaps even some great steak. But the party God is throwing goes beyond all your parties. The party God is throwing will nourish every person on earth—nourish them by destroying the things that destroy us, by destroying death itself. Even more, it's a party that everyone can go to. The entry price is great too: you just show up, wanting to party with God, and you can get in.

Perhaps you think you aren't worthy. Let me tell you, lots of people felt that way but God sent out his servants to bring even the bums and hoboes from the street. "I want my party filled. I want people to know my love. I want them to be joyful and satisfied. I want to embrace every one of them, to tell them that they will live forever once they know my love."

Oh, I know, you heard about the idiot who didn't show up dressed right. Well, what do you expect? All he had to do was put the garment on that he was given. But he thought he could treat his party as a joke. That's like treating his life like a joke. He's like a lot of people who say they are something but never live it out. Once you are embraced by God, the least you can do is embrace God back.

Sure, sure, there's money to be made, and degrees to be earned, and bottles to be opened, and jokes to be told. Sure, you have so many other things you have to do. But wouldn't it be a shame to have done so many things in your life and still have missed the one thing you could not miss? Wouldn't it be a shame if you thought you were at the party of life but missed the real party altogether?

God is a God of feasts. The feast that God throws is the feast of unending love and gracious mercy. It's a feast where we all can belong, surrounded by each other, filled with a joy that can never end. You think God is about punishment, shame, doom and gloom. You sure have that wrong. God is about a joy that is totally contagious—unless we close ourselves completely.

Come, the feast is ready. The party is going to happen. Why sit on the side or, even worse, outside?