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Sisters and Brothers, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, we exist, and live, and have our being inside an awe-inspiring cosmos.

A cosmos filled with objects like blackholes and nebulae, comets and asteroids, and strange and amazing worlds, planets with some of the most peculiar of features.

And maybe the most strange of all is this planet earth, with its abundance of life.

Have we ever stopped to think about how unique our planet may just be?

So far, astronomers and all those persons at NASA, and those persons at all the other space agencies, that explore the cosmos...

So far no scientist has been able to conclude that life exists any where else in all the great expanse of space.

Yes, right now, we are soaring along on this blue and green planet through the darkness of the cosmos, and this rock on which we travel is all we know of life in the cosmos.

And not just life, but intelligent life, life that is able to contemplate the very cosmos in which we live.

Think about how remarkable that is—that we can contemplate the cosmos.

No other lifeform that we know of on this planet does that.

We may be the only creatures in all the cosmos that has this capacity, this ability to contemplate the cosmos.

And, some philosophers, some of those profound thinkers of our human species...some have wondered, "Would the cosmos even 'exist' if there was no one to contemplate its existence?"

It is kind of like that philosophical question, “Does a tree make a sound if it falls in the woods, and there is no one there to hear it?”

“Does a tree make a sound if it falls in the woods, and there is no one around to hear it?”

“Does the cosmos exist if there is no one there to contemplate its existence?”

And so, what if no life at all existed in the cosmos?

What if our planet never developed life, and no other world in the cosmos developed life?

What if there were no intelligent beings to contemplate the cosmos?

What would that mean? Why even have a cosmos then at all?

These are the kind of questions that should disturb us, because they get at the question of why do we human beings exist?

Is it so that the cosmos can be known, so that someone is around to contemplate the cosmos’ existence?

Is that the purpose of human beings?

It reminds us of that saying from Des Cartes, “I think, therefore I am?”

The cosmos contemplates itself, we humans as part of the cosmos contemplate the cosmos, and so it exists.

PAUSE

I share all of this with us this morning, because something similar is happening in our gospel reading today.

There in the gospel reading, Jesus tells us yet another parable.

And this parable is about a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

Now, the obvious connection here is to God the Father and his Son Jesus, right?

But, all those who have been invited to the wedding banquet show indifference toward the king and the wedding of his Son.

The text says, "They made light of it, and went away, one to his farm, another to his business."

And so, what does the king do but invite others to the wedding banquet, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests.

And the question I think we might ask, "Is there a wedding banquet if there are no guests who show up?"

Like a falling tree in the woods, with no one around there to hear it...

Like a cosmos without intelligent life to contemplate the cosmos' existence...

"Is there a wedding banquet if there are no guests who show up?"

Now, in our gospel reading, the wedding banquet seems to turn out okay, because the king invited other guests to the banquet when those original invitees didn't show up.

So all is well.

But what if NO ONE took heed of the invitation?

What if NO ONE showed up even after the invitation was made to a second round of folks?

And, for me, this is a haunting question.

This is THE question for the present age.

For the church, and other religious faiths out there, and for those social and service organizations out there, what we are all finding is that this is more and more the case.

What happens when fewer and fewer show up?

And eventually, what happens when no one shows up?

What happens when there is no one left to hear what we (as pastors) have to say?

Scary thought, isn't it?

Frightening prospect, isn't it?

What happens to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when there is no one left to hear it?

And, I am not just talking about the future day when as astronomers say our sun will become bloated, growing into a Red Giant and will swallow up the inner planets of our solar system, including earth.

And there will no longer be an earth.

There will no longer be life on the planet, no longer a human species, no longer any one to hear the gospel.

I am not just talking about that future day. That is billions of years away and so hardly worth worrying about.

No, what I am talking about is a reality where human beings, living on this planet, no longer give any consideration to God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

Could that even happen? Sure.

Think about the various belief systems that have come and gone.

There is no longer any organized cult around the worship of Baal, the ancient Canaanite god of fertility, at least no organized cult that I am aware of.

There are no organized cults around the gods Cybele (si-bell), Isis, and Mithras, those mystery religions of ancient Rome.

At least no organized cults that I am aware of.

So, could Christianity succumb to the same fate? Could Christianity fizzle out?

Sure. And so what would that mean? What if no one came to the God's wedding banquet anymore?

PAUSE

According to a survey conducted by *The Economist*, a British weekly newspaper, and by YouGov a British International Internet-based market research and data analytics firm...

According to a survey conducted in 2023 by *The Economist* and *YouGov*, the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as having NO religious affiliation, often labeled as "Nones" —  
N-O-N-E-S...

The percentage of Americans who claim NO religious affiliation is between 20 and 29%.

In comparison, the survey found that 30% of those surveyed claim to be Protestant, and 21% claim to be Catholic.

Another survey taken by the Associated Press and National Opinion Research Center said the percentage of Nones is 30%.

So, as many as 3 out of every ten people say they have NO religious affiliation.

And this does not take into account those who claim a religious affiliation but are at best peripheral members of a religious institution.

In other words, our society is quickly becoming un-religious.

PAUSE

But, here is the problem, and we really can't get around this.

Even though people might claim NO religious affiliation, this does not mean they don't worship a god. In truth, there is no such thing as an atheist.

There is no such thing as an atheist nor an agnostic, which is someone who says there may or may not be a god.

There is no such thing as an individual who doesn't subscribe to some power, give their life over to some authority, however we want to call it.

Yes, there are people, many people as these surveys conclude, who are, yes, NOT affiliated with a religion.

But everyone believes in a "god."

Now, why do I say that? Because everyone is submissive to, gives control over to, something in their life.

It may not be Allah, or Jesus Christ, or the Jewish God Yahweh.

But everyone turns to something and gives control over to that something.

It may be that we turn to alcohol, or drugs, or gambling, and those things have control over our lives.

It may be that we turn to food, or sex, or materialism, and those things have power over our lives.

It may be that we turn to politics, or social media, or work, and those things we worship.

It may be family, or medicine and health, or money to which we lift up as the authority of our lives.

Martin Luther said this about the Ten Commandments, and I have noted this before in Bible Study or in worship, but it is so worth reiterating.

The first commandment, said Luther, is the most important.

If we follow that commandment, we don't need the other nine.

Because the other nine commandments describe the ways in which we make other things into false gods, and put those things before the true God.

Everyone worships some "god."

We all obey some summons to some god's function or event, while at the same time ignoring the invite to the wedding banquet of the Son of the Father.

And so, it may not be so much as question about what happens when people no longer show up at the wedding banquet of the Christian God, as it is a question about helping people recognize what it is that people worship aside from the true God, and why people worship that alternative, and what does that alternative provide for the individual.

Is the thing we worship life-giving? Is it edifying? Does it build up the person? If so, how?

In our most dire of need, does our so-called god provide comfort and hope? If so, how?

Does our god sustain us every day?

Does our god, that which we worship hinder our relationships in anyway?

This is often the best litmus test to know if something has become a god in our life, if something has taken control of our life in an unhealthy way...that question is key, does our so-called god cause hurt and harm to our relationships?

These are the questions we need to get at within our society.

As I see it, a survey about a population's religious affiliation is inadequate.

Yes, in general people are no longer in places of worship. We get that.

But, what are people worshipping, what are their gods? And why have they turned to them? How are these gods responding to their needs, if they in fact are?

These are the questions we don't think about nearly enough.

And this is what hinders our ability to improve society—not knowing the answers to these questions.

One thing we do know, these other gods are not answering the need for human relationship.

Indeed, we may have heard that earlier in spring this year the U.S. Surgeon General called attention to the epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and lack of connection in the country.

50% of US adults are experiencing loneliness. This is different from being alone—people can be alone and not be lonely.

No, this is loneliness, which has all sorts of effects on physical health, like increased risk of heart disease, increased risk of stroke, and in older adults an increased risk in developing dementia.

So, yes, the “gods” that individual people are worshipping outside of faith communities, are not addressing that need in our country for connection and community.

So, on this front, the answer seems apparent, doesn't it? The need for church and other communities is evident.

And God, as we hear in our gospel reading, is inviting all people to come to the banquet that is the church.

God says, “Put aside the false gods, and come to the banquet and experience a relationship with the real and living God.”

This is an important message we need to communicate.

“Come to the banquet. And let us give thanks to God.” Amen.