

An Open Invitation

Texts: Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9 (Series A, 19th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps.106:1-6, 19-23

Matthew 22:1-14

Prayer:

When the chief priests and Pharisees failed to lay their malicious hands, on Jesus (*Matthew 21:45-46*), Jesus “spoke to them again by parables” (*Matthew 22:1*). He spoke of the kingdom of heaven being “like unto a king, who made a marriage feast for his son” (*Matthew 22:2*).

When the king first announced the wedding, his invited guests refused to come (*Matthew 22:3*). So, according to custom of the day, he sent out a second announcement (*Matthew 22:4*).

My first year in seminary we had a church history professor who would say the most outrageous things. He was funny. He was sometimes offensive and yet, very challenging. You just never knew what to expect or what he might say next.

After a particularly outrageous comment he would look at us and say, “You know it is an overstatement, and if you quote me outside of class I’ll call you a liar.” That was his way of telling us to not take what he said *literally* but to take it *seriously*. That was his way of getting us to look beyond factual history and see a deeper truth.

That was his way of challenging our preconceived ideas and expectations so that *we might see something new, hear something new, think something new*, and, ultimately, become something new.

I feel that’s what Jesus is doing in today’s gospel (*Matthew 22:1-14*). Have you ever received an invitation to a party you really did not want to attend? What did you do about that? I’ll bet you did not mistreat, abuse, and murder the mailman. That’s what happens in this parable. Maybe Jesus is overemphasizing his point.

Have you ever invited people to your party who did not attend? You cleaned the house, you cooked, you decorated. The table was set, the candles were lit, the music was playing in the back ground.

Everything was ready but some of the guests didn't come. Did it make you so angry that you could burned down their houses? Probably not, but that's what happens in this parable. Maybe Jesus is exaggerating.

This parable of the King's Son's Wedding is so outrageous, so shocking, that it begs to be taken *seriously* not literally. It begs to be taken as truth not as *historical* fact. No doubt, ***this is a parable of judgment***, but it may not be the judgment we think it is. Speaking about the first group of guests the king says, "*Those invited were not worthy.*"

By implication those in the second-invited group were worthy. We tend to get nervous and fearful when God begins making judgments. It leaves us wondering whether we are in the first group or the second group. Are we unworthy or are we worthy?

I suspect our nervousness and fear about God's judgments arise from the assumption that God judges us in the same way we so often judge others. More often than not our judgments of others are judgments of *exclusion*. It is the opposite with God.

What if Jesus is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven is not business as usual according to our standards? What if God's judgment on our lives is one of grace, acceptance, and invitation; a judgment of *inclusion*?

If that's true then what separates or distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second? The difference isn't that one was more deserving than the other. The first-invited guests were the recipients of the king's invitation and favor. But so were the second-invited guests.

And so was the man who showed up without a wedding robe. They were all invited. They were all favored. None of them had done anything to earn or deserve an invitation. It was just given. If that's true for them, it's true for us.

The difference isn't that the king likes one group more than the other group. His sole motivation is to share his banquet. He wants someone, anyone, everyone, to join in his joy and celebration, and be a part of his kingdom and life. Both groups were given the same opportunity.

If that's true for them, it's true for us. The difference isn't that some guests are good and others are bad. There is no distinction or judgment made based upon behavior, beliefs, attitudes, or morals.

To the contrary, with the second round of invitations the king sends his servants into the main streets with the instruction to "invite everyone you find."

And they did. They "went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad and ugly, commoners, slaves, servants and merchants." If that's true for them, it's true for us.

Probably that is not what we normally do. But the parable is talking about God's kingdom not ours. So, what is it? What's the difference between those who were not worthy and those who were?

There's only one thing that distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second-invited guests. **Presence**. The second-invited guests showed up. The first-invited guests did not. The "wedding hall was filled" with the second-invited guests but the first-invited guests "would not come." That's the only difference between the two groups.

The key to our life in God is to just **show up**, to **be present**. That's a lot easier said than done. To be present is difficult work. Think how difficult it is to be present to another person.

- It means establishing the other person as our priority.
It means seeing them for who they are and not who we want them to be or think they should be.
- It means opening ourselves to receive their life into our own.
- It means the vulnerability of entrusting and giving our life to the other.

- It means letting go of our own agendas, distractions, fears, and prejudices.
- It means bringing and offering all that we are and all that we have.

If we're not doing that with others we're probably not doing it with God. The culture in which we live says, if we don't earn it or work for it we assume it has no value. After all you get what you pay for, right?

We're convinced we have better things to do and better places to be. That's what the first-invited group did. What they did not realize, and what we sometimes do not realize, is that there is no life outside the banquet, the kingdom.

To show up and be present is to be worthy before God. It's that simple and it's that difficult. We don't earn or prove our worthiness as a prerequisite to entering the banquet. We show up, be present, and discover for ourselves the worthiness God has always known about us. That's when our lives begin to change, by pure grace.

But what about the person who showed up without a wedding robe? This is about more than just a dress code violation. Something else was missing. "He was there, but it was as if he wasn't really there". Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we're not really present. Our body is there but we've left the room.

Now, this parable from Jesus is not really about a wedding feast, but a story about the salvation that is available if you follow Jesus. The king represents God, who asks each and every one of us to come into his Kingdom. . . no matter what our station in life, what we have done in the past. The Kingdom of Heaven is not limited to only the 'good' people or the Jewish people. ***Heaven is open to all of us.***

But there are some conditions for entry to the Kingdom of Heaven. The scripture says that there was one man who did not have a wedding robe. But this doesn't refer to a piece of clothing – that just doesn't make sense since the king's servants went out onto the street and hauled in everyone they could find.

Obviously, no one was dressed for the wedding. This 'robe' is the *Robe of Salvation*, which we all get when we give our lives to Jesus. . . when all our sins are forgiven and we are clean and spotless. Yet there are people who hear the call of Jesus, and still refuse to come to God. Any excuse will do: they "make light" (*Matthew 22:5*) of the gospel, thus insulting both the host and the groom.

In conclusion: As I ponder these readings God's great forgiveness and restoration, and what is an appropriate wardrobe to meet the Divine, I realize how *now* is always a good time for me to respond in prayer ~

Dear God, I accept! I have the directions, and Thanks for inviting me and encouraging me to put down my phone more often than I pick it up. Heavenly Father, keep reminding me, please, and I'll accept again and again and yet again. *We are all invited to the King's banquet. Amen.*

October 15, 2023