

## “The Wedding Banquet”

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Exodus 32:1-14

Matthew 22:1-14

Have you ever gladly accepted an invitation that was weeks or months away, but when the time really came to get ready and go, you changed your mind? That’s what happened in the parable of the Kingdom that Maurice read this morning. In the parable, a king prepared a wedding banquet for his son. But when the time came for the guests to gather, no one felt like coming.

In the time of Jesus it took a long time to prepare a wedding feast, and most people didn’t have an accurate way to keep track of time. They didn’t have clocks and calendars in every home. They couldn’t look at a newspaper, listen to the radio, or go on line to get the date and time. So the custom was to send out personal invitations well in advance. People would reply, but the exact date would not be set until everything was ready. Makes sense, right? Then the host would send another notice to tell people it was time to come.

But in the parable, when the day finally came, it says the guests “would not come.” They didn’t give an excuse. They simply refused to honor the invitation. It was one thing to agree to attend in theory. After all, it was supposed to be an honor to be invited by the king. But it was a different story when the time actually came. At that point they didn’t want to stop what they were doing, to change clothes and go to the banquet.

So far, this parable makes sense. But then the story turns violent and crazy. The king tries again and sends other servants to convince the invitees to come. But the servants are grabbed, abused and then murdered. Whoa! Where did that come from? You don’t want to attend? Fine! What’s the violence about? But it gets worse. In a rage, the king sends in the army, kills the murderers, and burns the entire city to the ground.

Does that make sense? But even more bizarre, the dinner is still on, and they still need guests. So the king sends his servants back, but this time out into the streets, to invite anyone they can find, whether they are good or bad. Those who came included outcasts, sinners, people who wouldn’t normally be welcome at a king’s table. We have no idea why they came. It doesn’t matter why. What’s important in the story is that they showed up.

This is not the end of this strange parable. But before we finish, a note about the violence. The gospel of Luke also has this part of the story, but in Luke nobody gets killed or thrown into outer darkness. It seems that Matthew is making a point by referring to a more recent event, the burning and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Matthew was not trying to glorify violence or justify war. But here was a real life example where those who refused God’s invitation eventually came to a bad end.

In the parable, the king represents God, who is inviting people to celebrate his son, Jesus Christ. The invited guests are God’s people, the people of Israel. The first messengers are the prophets, but the people refuse the invitation. The second invitation comes from more prophets, like John the Baptist. Or maybe they are people from

Matthew's faith community who were persecuted, abused and some martyred by religious leaders and Romans. Matthew didn't make this violence up. He was just reminding his readers of things that had happened in the past.

But it's the last part of the parable that offends the most. After the wedding hall was filled with people off the street, including those who were good as well as those who were bad, not necessarily worthy, but willing to accept the invitation, the king came to see the guests. He noticed that one man was not wearing the proper clothes for a banquet. And when the man offered no reason for his behavior, the king had his servants bind him and throw him out into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

What's this suddenly with the fashion police? What if the man was poor and didn't own wedding clothes? Some people back then only had one tunic, which they wore 24/7. A wedding garment would probably be longer than a tunic worn for work, and if you could afford it, you would wear white. What was this man supposed to do?

Well, back then if someone only had one tunic, it would be possible to borrow clothing from a neighbor for a special event. Or the host might provide the expected clothing himself. I think of fancy restaurants today that do that. When my uncouth, hippie husband went to lunch at Lutece years ago, they insisted on supplying him with a sports jacket, because he was not properly dressed. What if one of Virginia's bridesmaids refused to wear a beautiful dress, but instead showed up to the wedding yesterday in jeans and a T-shirt? It wouldn't seem right. All of us who attended wore our best outfits. Even Suzanne had on a dress and stockings. We all wanted to show our respect for Virginia and Jonathan, and have a sense of celebration and joy.

If the man in the parable refused to make the effort to be prepared for the banquet, it would be just as bad as refusing the invitation. There's more involved than just showing up. The point is to honor the occasion, to rejoice with the king, and to act like a real guest at the wedding.

Of course this parable is not really about clothing or wearing a required uniform. The wedding garment symbolizes what we put on in response to God's call. In Galatians (3:27) it says, "As many of you as were baptized in Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ." When we are baptized we "put on Christ," and Christ lives in us. We are still ourselves, but the things that separate or distinguish us from each other no longer matter: rich or poor, male or female, gay or straight, born and raised in church or raised with no religion or religious values at all, these things make no difference in God's eyes, once we are baptized and have put on Christ.

Colossians (3:12) says, "As God's chosen ones... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience." The wedding robe is a symbol of repentance and faith, and our willingness to give God our best, and outward sign that we have taken the invitation seriously, and are showing some respect. Many people are called or invited to God's feast, but the man in the parable was not chosen to stay, because for whatever reason, he didn't prepare himself and act respectfully. Everyone is invited. But not everyone gets to stay.

The parable of the wedding banquet teaches us that God invites everyone, all kinds of people, to enter the Kingdom of heaven. It doesn't matter how good or bad we have been or are. Those of us who are here today are like the people in the street who accepted the invitation. We're not here because we are better than anyone else. We are

not entitled to be invited, but God invites us anyway. And we have accepted. We have shown up.

But once we accept the invitation, there's another step to take. If we are to be part of God's kingdom, we can't just be spectators. We've got to put on the robe and take our place at the table. It doesn't matter whether we feel we are good enough or worthy. God provides forgiveness and new life in Christ. We just have to trust God enough to accept it and wear it: accept the forgiveness and live the new life.

So we are like the people on the street who come to the banquet. But we are also like the king's servants, sent out to invite more people to God's banquet of life. Yesterday Virginia and Jonathan packed this sanctuary with all kinds of guests, simply by inviting them. Now, it's true, they had a special event to celebrate, their own wedding. Everyone loves Virginia and Jonathan and so they came from all over to be here. Some even traveled thousands of miles. But we also can invite people here on Sunday. Why can't we go out and keep inviting people, no matter who they are, until someone says "yes?"

Now the invitation is not just about going to church. Attending worship is a sign that we have given God priority in our lives. But the invitation is directly connected to God. God invites us to the fountain of life, to find the nourishment, peace and joy our souls have been looking for. What a wonderful thing to share in, and invite others to enjoy. Won't you come to the wedding feast? There's lots of good food, music, dancing and celebration. Won't you come and see that God is good?

How do we respond if someone we invite rejects the invitation? We invite them again. And if they still refuse, do we hope that God will destroy them? Do we bomb their houses and burn down their cities? Of course not! We find someone else to invite. It doesn't matter who. All I know is there are still people out there who are hungry for a word of forgiveness, or who need a reason to celebrate.

May we feast at God's table of life, and invite our neighbors and friends to join the celebration, for God welcomes all. Amen.