

Oct 12 - All Are Invited

Matthew 22:1-14

As we begin our look at this parable it will help us to get a little historical sociological context. For an ancient society predicated upon honor and shame, nothing could bestow more honor (to oneself and, by extension, to one's family) than attending a royal wedding, particularly the wedding of the king's own son. This is the kind of event for which you make room in your calendar. Circle the date. Don't forget. Be there at all costs.

Conflict quickly surfaces; and it surfaces in two stages. The first stage is a simple summary: the king summons his guests via his servants, "but they would not come." He's snubbed by *everyone*. At this point the king already faces a tremendous amount of shame that, especially by ancient standards, must be remedied. In other words, he must find a way to save face. The disrespectful invitees face some kind of action, depending on what kind of king this is, to their deliberate insult.

Surprisingly, however, the king graciously extends a second summons, and with the specific instructions that his servants build up the event: "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." In other words, you don't know what you're missing. Please reconsider. While this isn't a literal begging on one's knees, it might be the royal equivalent. The king really wants *these* people at the party.

Then the conflict turns violent. Some invitees only "neglect" the king's hospitality in favor of their own everyday concerns, "one to his farm, and another to his business." The rest, however, mistreat and kill the royal servants, thus eliciting the wrath of the king. His forbearance now expired; the king slaughters "those murderers" (now deemed "unworthy") and fills his hall with whoever can be brought in off the streets, "both good and bad."

What does this parable mean? It is an extended allegory. The king is God who is shown to be patient and inviting. The guests are the people of Israel. The messengers

originally were the prophets who called the people to faithfulness. Their unwillingness to listen is a rejection of God's invitation to feast at the heavenly banquet. Though God is justified in punishing and rejecting them, God continues to reach out. Jesus is the second messenger who comes to share the good news of the kingdom. Jesus makes it as appealing as possible. And yet, Jesus' invitation will be rejected and he, the messenger will be killed. Here we hear for the first time the word of judgment. God's patience is not unending.

Now we move on to the people who are brought in to fill the banquet hall. Who are these people from the streets? Most scholars believe that they represent the church and the messengers are the apostles who went forth after the resurrection to share the good news. This helps to make sense of some of the rest of the story. In the understanding of the early church, faith and baptism was like putting on a new set of clothes. This is how people could be brought in from the roadside and still be wearing the appropriate wedding garments. As for the one who was found wanting? Unfortunately, then as now, some come to church and say the right things but their lifestyle does not change. This is the person who has been invited but found to not be wearing his wedding garments. He has no answer as to why because he understands that he is not robed in wedding vestments. He is not truly faithful. Again we hear the word of judgment. Just showing up to church is not enough. You have to believe and live a faithful life. So what does it say to us today?

Too often we focus on the word of judgment. Preachers use it to scare people into right living or people see it as an image of a vengeful God. We will talk in a moment about this element of the story but we need to see that Jesus' focus is on God who loves us and offers us grace. Think about how patient and forgiving the king is seen to be in this story. We have him sending out his servants inviting his guests to the wedding banquet. Even when the invitation was rejected, as we said a huge insult in this culture, the king responds again with a gracious invite. Even after the message of judgment there is again an invite and those who did not expect to be invited are welcomed in. Do you see the focus on grace?

God welcomes and invites. Even when we do not respond appropriately God does not give up on us. We should never take this for granted but instead be amazed that we are invited at all, that we are wanted, even sought for. The heavenly banquet is set and there is a place reserved for us and God will not be happy unless we are in attendance. This is a story of good news for it reminds us of God's gracious actions.

Yet there is a word of challenge. We need to accept the invitation not just in words but in actions. Israel believed they were the promised children of God, and they were, but they believed that the blessing came without conditions. God loved them but then they worshiped other gods. They did not listen to the prophets and rejected their guidance. Then they were amazed when then had to deal with the consequences of their actions. They were attacked by their enemies, Jerusalem was sacked. They turned to God with a plaintive cry of why have you let this happen? They were reminded that they needed to turn back to God in faith and in actions. God loved them but held them accountable.

This level of accountability continues in the life of Jesus. When the leaders of Israel reject him and have him crucified, God does not stop loving the Hebrew people but does empower the apostles to go forth and ultimately create a new faith, a faith that is connected to that long ago promise of God's faithfulness and love. And again that level of accountability. Just saying you are a Christian without any lifestyle changes really tests the boundaries of God's patience. We don't like the concept of judgment. We don't want to go back to the old Puritanical sermons of Johnathan Edwards who preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But we need to hold the tension of judgment with this greater message grace or else it is meaningless.

So we need to celebrate that we are invited but also are reminded that we are to act appropriately. Think about going to a fancy wedding. You wouldn't wear your garden clothes, you wouldn't stand at the buffet table and demand more and more. You understand what actions are appropriate. God wants the same respect as we celebrate the fact that we are loved and forgiven.

In closing let me share just one brief idea that holds this tension. It comes from Guidepost magazine several years ago. She moved and was happy to get a job quickly. She was basically an introvert and found it challenging to be at a desk beside “Shirley” we will call her. Shirley was an extrovert to the max. She knew everybody, organized all the office parties and seemed to know everyone’s business. Shirley would invite her to come with the gang for lunch when all she wanted to do was sit quietly at her desk and read her devotional magazine. She was getting really irritated with Shirley’s continued advances and then she read an article at lunch that challenged the faithful to reach out to all with love. She realized her attitudes had been less than loving. So that afternoon she turned to Shirley and said, “Let’s do lunch tomorrow.” She was in knots all night thinking about an hour with her. But next day putting on a smile she picked up her purse and went out for lunch. They no more than ordered when Shirley turned to her and said, “I am so glad you said yes. I see you reading your Bible and I am hoping you can help me.” Shirley then poured out all sorts of things that were going on in her life. Her extroversion was a cover for deep pain. Shirley ended, “Will you pray for me?” Since that time she and Shirley have started most mornings with a brief prayer and they have become friends. Shirley is still an extrovert and she an introvert but each now values the other. She enjoys that Shirley gets her out of her ruts and Shirley values her quiet strength. All of this happened because she heard the challenge to not just say I am a Christian but to act like one, even when it was challenging.

So, you are invited, the table is set, will you come or will you let all of the other things in life crowd out some of your commitment to faithful living?