

Year A Proper 28 Matthew 22:1-14 "You are invited...will you come?"

This is the third story in a row that Jesus has told to the religious leaders – those rip-roaring mad religious leaders who have challenged Jesus' authority after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple. Jesus isn't doing anything to calm their anger and he sure is making his point. He is hammering them with one story after another that says to them, "You're not going to be a part of God's Kingdom if you don't change your ways. All of these other people that you don't think are worthy, he says, they're getting in ahead of you. You say you're following God's laws but your heart isn't matching up with your words." I just can't imagine how angry the religious leaders were getting – Jesus was telling them off in front of a huge crowd of people. But I can imagine how joyful that crowd was as they listened to Jesus. They were everything the religious leaders were not. These people were poor, they were in need of healing, they hungered for Jesus' teachings, and they knew they were sinners.

When Matthew wrote this story into his Gospel, Jesus had already died, had already been resurrected, was already sitting at God's right hand. This wasn't just Jesus speaking to those angry religious leaders and the joyful crowd. This was Jesus speaking to the Church he had left behind – Christ's body here on earth. This is the story of Salvation and we are a part of that story.

The story of salvation ends in the complete fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. This is here presented to us in the form of a wedding banquet. A note of caution though: Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God "may be compared to a king who holds a wedding banquet for his son." We can compare but we cannot draw exact lines to elements in the story. God, for example, is similar in

some respects to the king but God is not exactly the king. Jesus' parables are subversive and surprising – radically challenging traditional thinking and systems. With that, let's take a closer look...

Food constantly pops up in the story of God – eating food, sharing food, being provided with food – all point to God's graciousness and love for us: Abraham and Sarah feeding the three angels, the manna given to the Israelites in the desert, Elijah being fed by ravens, Jesus eating with outcasts and sinners, breaking bread and sharing wine with his disciples the night before his death, and the bread and wine we share together in remembrance of his passion – sharing in his death and resurrection and spiritually nourishing us, filling us with God's love, making us one body as we share the One body.

All of this tells us that being invited to share food with God – to come to his wedding feast – is not something to be taken lightly – and yet, that is exactly what happens in this story – twice.

First there were the original people who had been invited to the feast. When the actual day arrived and the king's servants went to them to remind them, they couldn't be bothered to go. They were too busy with their day-to-day activities to take part in the special event. One went to his farm. One went to his store. Too busy for God, believing that they are doing just fine on their own without God. When we remember that Jesus is aiming this story at the religious leaders, we realize that the authoritative religious system, the system wielding the power in Israel, is shown to be no match for God's power. The system has strayed from its purpose of doing God's will, has strayed from working with God toward the fulfillment of God's purpose. This is not a shock since we still experience this.

Systems are formed of people and people go astray – captivated by worldly power and wealth or simply captivated by their own opinions, blinded to God’s ways. So, when Jesus the bridegroom shows up and God invites them to the wedding feast some accept but a lot do not. A lot of the religious leaders did not accept the invitation. Jesus is telling this story to some of those religious leaders who had turned down the invitation – they didn't want to disrupt their lives for the special occasion – they did not want to give up the power and position they had in their community.

But Matthew doesn’t leave this story focused on the religious leaders but the lesson we can all learn from them. He places today’s story into the larger picture of salvation and he does this by adding in details that seem a little drastic to us. Not only do the people with power turn down the invitation, they beat and kill the unfortunate servants that the king had sent out to them to remind them. This has echoes of the ongoing story in which God continuously sent his prophets with the reminder of his invitation – some of these prophets were beaten, some killed. God sent his son with the reminder of his invitation and his son was beaten and killed. God continues to send prophets to us. We are, perhaps, reluctant to name people as prophets – maybe this seems presumptuous. But we certainly say that people speak with a prophetic voice and these people still face backlash. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed for his words and actions. Young environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, is ridiculed for her passionate speeches. The point of this bit in Jesus’ story is to make clear to us that we are not simply dealing with people who do not care about the invitation and who ignore the invitation. These people are actively working against the king, making deliberate choices that go against the king’s invitation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, we learn that not only was the king annoyed that his guests were turning him down, he was furious and sent out his army to destroy their city. This is most definitely one of those spots where we need to be very careful about equating God – who is love – with this king who, in his anger, violently destroys the city. Judgement is coming and God will remove all brokenness from creation but it is human language and understanding that pictures this in terms of military defeat. It is what the people understood, it was within their realm of experience – the mighty conquered through war. Images of conflict and war still come to mind when we talk about conquering and overcoming evil. Jesus shows us a different way – the way of love, complete non-violence, utter forgiveness displayed in the cross. God's sword, we are told repeatedly in Scripture, is the word that comes from his mouth (Rev.1:16, Rev.19:21).

Yes, there is judgement...there are consequences – but this comes from a loving, forgiving God. We see that when those who are called and invited by God to do his work yet neglect it, making themselves busy with their own businesses, God does not give up on his work of saving people but calls others for that task. The subversive message is that the position and authority of religious leaders and elites, seemingly permanently entrenched in society, will not last forever because God will open a new door, break traditions into pieces, and continue his work through other people. The consequence for turning down God's invitation, for not doing what we are called to do, is not having a relationship with God, giving up your place at the table.

We see in the story that when the religious leaders give up their seat at the banquet in the fullness of God's kingdom, all of the other people are then directly invited in their place. Jesus says that all will be invited to the feast – good and bad. We've heard that before...all of the fish will be gathered in the net and then sorted; the weeds will be allowed to grow with the wheat until harvest time...Our job is to invite. God's job is to judge – to decide who will live in his kingdom and who will not. This is where the religious leaders fell short in their work with God and it is something we must be on guard against as well.

That brings us to the second time in the story that God's invitation was taken lightly. It is shocking when the gracious king – who opened his doors to everyone so that he could fill his hall – spots a guest not wearing a wedding robe and tosses that guest out on his ear. That seems, at first, an overreaction and made me stop and think, "Why?" I remembered the words Jesus spoke earlier in Matthew's Gospel..."Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom." And I thought of the message constantly popping up throughout Matthew's Gospel...Hearers of the word must also be doers of the word.

When we accept God's invitation, we cannot take it lightly. When we love God with all that we are, it will show – like wrapping ourselves in the beautiful wedding robe provided for us, a robe the guest did not put on. He wasn't prepared to be a part of the feast because donning the robe comes with responsibilities, the promises we made at our baptisms: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; resisting evil, repenting; proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ; seeking and

serving Christ in all persons; striving for justice and peace for everyone; and safeguarding the earth.

God continues to send out his invitation for us to put on the wedding robe – to clothe ourselves with Christ – accepting all of the responsibilities that come along with it. It sure wasn't just religious leaders from 2000 years ago who had trouble accepting God's invitation. We send ourselves, and others, messages of busyness and priorities, making choices that leave God out in the cold...If that's the message sent then that is the message believed. But care must be taken that we don't end up being the ones left out in the cold – in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. God's mission is to have everyone and all of creation in right relationship with Him and with each other. Jesus summed up all of God's laws into two great commandments – to love God and to love each other. We are gathered by God to be a community of believers – to be the body of Christ – we can only be a body together.

This community is one amongst thousands of communities meeting in God's name around the world. Even as I share this message with you, there are thousands of other preachers sharing the same message – that we must continue to reach out to everyone around us, to make connections, build relationships, extend God's invitation, until all are included in the community of God's love – one body. With voice and deed, let us speak the invitation to God's banquet. With voice and deed, let us share the Good News, trusting the Holy Spirit will work with and through what we say and do. Wrap yourself in the beautiful wedding robe given to you in baptism, and enjoy the feast!