

“BY INVITATION ONLY!”

Matthew 22:1-14

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Every now and then my wife and I will hear of someone who has recently become engaged to be married. “I wonder if we’ll be invited to the wedding?” we think. There are certain events where it is proper to attend only if you receive an invitation. Wedding ceremonies are oftentimes “open church,” open to all who desire to attend, and certainly no one stands at the church door with a list checking names. But wedding receptions are a different story. Only invited guests are welcome.

There is a custom that has become popular recently of sending a post card or a pre-invitation several months before the wedding, saying, “Hold this date. Ryan and Kristen are going to get married next August, and want you to attend their wedding.” Then five or six weeks before the wedding, the actual invitation comes in the mail, complete with a return card to R.S.V. P. That’s kind of how it was in the ancient Near East in the days of Jesus. Invitations were sent for wedding feasts, but the exact time was not stated. When all was ready, messengers were sent through the village with a final summons to tell the guests to come.

Jesus tells a story about a royal wedding in which the invitation had gone out in advance. Now it was time to open the banquet hall and receive the guests. But alas, the unthinkable happened: none of the invited guests were able to attend! It wasn’t that they were doing bad things, you understand. They were simply too busy to take time out of their schedules to attend a wedding reception. One had to tend to his farm. (My brother-in-law is a farmer, and the chores have to be done everyday. The animals can’t wait until tomorrow.) Another had business to tend to. Just when he thought he could get free, his cell phone rang, and there was another emergency to tend to. Some were even rude to the messengers who were extending the invitation.

The king had a problem. The band had been hired. The food was ready. It would spoil if no one ate it. So he did the sensible thing: he sent his messengers back into the streets with the instructions to invite everyone they could find to the banquet.

And come they did! People who never dreamed they’d get an invitation to a free meal at the country club showed up in droves! Tax-collectors, prostitutes, the riff-raff, the nobodies, the blind, the lame, the people who thought they’d been forgotten. Winos, street people, those who were hovering above heating ducts on the sidewalks downtown — all took a seat at the banquet. What a celebration it was! Suddenly, it didn’t matter that the name on the name card didn’t match the person sitting in the chair. Suddenly it didn’t matter that the king had been insulted by his friends and colleagues who refused to join him on one of the most significant days of his life. All that mattered was that people were eating, dancing and having a good time. All that

mattered was that this was indeed a celebration that his son and new daughter-in-law would remember for the rest of their lives.

Now those of us who have been around the church for a while recognize that this parable is a thinly-veiled story about the kingdom of God. In fact, I would caution you not to try to interpret each element of the story — for parables are not meant to be a point-for-point comparison to real life. They are stories designed to make just one point. And the point of today’s parable is that in spite of the engraved invitations that were on back-order for weeks and took many an evening to address and cost a fortune to send; in spite of the fact that most of the people on the guest list sent their regrets; in spite of the fact that some never bothered to R.S.V.P., some said they were coming and didn’t show, in the final analysis, **God’s guest list includes everybody**. There is an engraved invitation for you, and an engraved invitation for me. Everyone is invited to God’s party.

The party is, of course, the fellowship of God’s kingdom, the fellowship of all believers in Jesus Christ. It is the fellowship of the church, the fellowship that we share when we respond to God’s call and become part of the community of faith. In the early church, the disciples envisioned the Kingdom of God as a great banquet, where there would be food and fellowship for all.

The question always comes when we are entertaining: If you invite everybody, will there be enough food? I grew up in a family with a brother and two sisters. My mom cooked for six people every night. But if we had company coming, even two people, she doubled the recipe. “I don’t want to run out,” she’d say.

Many of you know that my dad has been a United Methodist pastor for over 65 years. I remember the story my parents told of the time early in their ministry when they planned a sacrificial meal at their church during Lent. The menu was only a small cup of soup for each parishioner. My mom spent the day making soup. Several huge pots of soup. (She didn’t want to run out.) That night there was a snowstorm. Almost nobody braved the bad weather and came to the dinner. So instead of a small cup, my parents served bowls of soup. Then they served seconds, then a third bowl to anyone who wanted one! One man commented afterward that he had never been so full in his life! As a sacrificial meal, focusing on the Lenten theme of sacrifice and self-denial, that experience was a total disaster. But what a beautiful illustration of the grace of God! We come expecting a little cup of soup. God in his lavish generosity gives us all we need and vastly more! We send invitations and only those with paid reservations have a place at the table and a meal prepared for them. God opens wide the door and says “whosoever will may come,” and there is more than enough food for all.

Not only is there more than enough food. There is no litmus test for admission; no need to show a photo I.D. God accepts me just as I am. I am given a place at the table with my healthy and my unhealthy impulses, my maturity and my immaturity, my sins and my achievements. Everyone sitting beside me whether it is in the pew (next chair) or at the table is a similar mix of good and bad. It is comforting to note that it is not those who are perfect who are invited to God’s banquet, but simply those who are human.

The story does not end here, though we’d like it to. Our society thrills to hear about God’s unconditional love (even though we often put conditions on love in our own relationships.) We resonate with the idea that God is like an overly indulgent grandfather who thinks the kids are wonderful no matter what they do. But there is a part two of this story. Some

commentators say it is another parable. At any rate, it is closely tied to the first part of the story and should not be ignored or glossed over.

As the king makes his way around the room greeting his guests, he notices a man who is not wearing a wedding robe. He is not properly dressed for the occasion. So the king has this man thrown out of the party! This action seems strange to us, almost cruel. Haven't we just heard that the gate has been flung open wide, that everyone has been invited to the party, that all are welcome at the Lord's Table? Now we hear that there is a dress code involved, and that it is being strictly enforced! Nobody said it was a "black tie" event. Surely street people can't be expected to go out and rent tuxedos and buy formal evening wear.

Again we need to ask the one point that the parable is making. In the new Testament, when a person was baptized, he or she was said to "put on Christ." After a period of study and preparation, the new convert was immersed in the water of baptism. At that moment, he or she symbolically died with Christ, and when raised up, it was analogous to being raised with Christ into a new life. After the baptism the person put on new clothes to drive home the point that he or she was becoming a new person in Christ.

The wedding robe is a metaphor for the Christian life, which Paul describes as a garment which one dons when putting on Christ. German theologian Karl Barth asks, "*For what is the new garment which the Christian has put on? The new person? Yes, but any suggestion which might remain that this is a new costume in which the wearer is still the same is dispelled when it is expressly stated in Galations 3:27 and Romans 13:14 that when a person puts on Christ he puts off the old person and puts on the new.*"(1)

When parents bring their children for baptism, usually the child is wearing a new outfit or one that has meaning for the family, one that has been used for this occasion for generations. The same is true for wedding gowns. Special occasions call for special clothes. Barth's point is well taken. The baptismal outfit, the wedding dress is not a costume covering the same old person underneath. It symbolizes the change of heart and the change of life that comes when we take these vows and enter into a new relationship with God and with each other.

After a wedding, as the bride and groom head for the limousine, family and friends gather around to throw birdseed or to blow bubbles or to ring bells or sound party horns. Occasionally someone will not take a handful of birdseed or a party horn or a bottle of bubbles. It appears they are not excited about the wedding and the festivities

The man who was not wearing a wedding robe was at the party but he was not putting himself into the celebration. He's like the people who when asked to clap their hands to the beat of the song sit with their arms folded across their chests. It reminds me of the teen-age girl (in another church I served) whose parents really wanted her to go to camp. They remembered how a week of church camp had changed their lives, and they wanted that experience for their daughter. The more they coaxed and encouraged, the more she resisted. Finally, she gave in. "O.K.," she said. "I'll go. But I won't have a good time." And she didn't. She sat there with her arms folded across her chest all week. She went to camp, but she made sure that none of the spirit of the place rubbed off on her. Will we set aside our personal agendas so that God can get through to us? Are we wearing a wedding garment this morning? Are we open to the spirit of God?

Does it matter what you wear to church? It doesn't matter to God. What matters is not what clothes you wear, but the spirit with which you approach this place. The idea of putting on

new clothes is a symbol of the fact that when we come to Christ, we receive a whole new lease on life. We can baptize children no matter what they are wearing. We don't have to wear an expensive wedding gown to get married. But the special clothes remind us of the change that is supposed to take place in our lives. When we "put on Christ," as Karl Barth reminds us, we cannot stay the same. We are called to a whole new life. While it is true that Jesus accepts us just as we are, he never leaves us the way he finds us. He is always calling us to a closer walk with him.

A social worker was distributing used clothing at a center in a rough part of the city. A 12 year-old boy came to get an overcoat for the winter. The social worker searched through the pile of clothing until he found a boy's coat that looked brand new, with no sign of wear. "Son," said the man, "Try this on." The boy put the coat on slowly and then began to touch it and look at it. His eyes grew wide with excitement. "Why," He gasped, "It's new!" Can you imagine what it meant for that boy to wear something new? Something like that happens to the person who "puts on Christ." "*Everything old has passed away; everything becomes new!*" (II Corin. 5:17)

I have an engraved invitation in my hand. It is addressed to you. It is an invitation to a whole new life. Will you respond? Will you take a seat at God's banquet? Will you let God's spirit make you new?

Prayer: Dear God, as we hear these stories about weddings and invitations, we realize that they are meant for us. Help us to respond to your gracious invitation to new life in Christ. Amen.

Note:

1. Quoted in *The Clergy Journal*. Vol.84. No.8., pp. 25-26.