

For Many Are Called...

Year A, Proper 23
Matthew 22:1-14

It's not every day that someone gets a wedding invitation to dinner by a king. It's a special event, so special in fact that it warrants marking it down on our calendars, making entries into Outlook, *and* inputting the date into our iPhones, just so we won't forget. We don't want to miss such an important occasion.

You can be sure that the king's household staff won't forget. Imagine the preparations that are involved, many of which were started weeks, if not months, before. The menu had to be decided, food purchased and prepared, the seating arranged, the band rehearsed, and everyone instructed in what needs to be done.

Then the day arrives. The lavish dinner was all set to go, the servers all lined up, the food hot, the groom in his place ready for his big entrance...and nothing. No one was there. Everyone had RSVP'd, but not a soul is to be found. In addition to disappointment, you can bet that the king was experiencing all sorts of emotions. The invited guests had shown little regard not only for the king and his son, but also the magnificent and joyful event that was to take place.

The groom in this parable is obviously Jesus. As he was about to make his entrance, the invitees were no where to be found. In the chapter preceding the one we read today, the writer of Matthew describes Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, surrounded by adoring crowds shouting "Hosanna", which means "save us". Five days later, though, Jesus was standing before Pontius Pilate, amid other citizens of Jerusalem, this time shouting, "Crucify him." In the end, the people of Jerusalem did not accept God's invitation. God's chosen ones did not appreciate the gift that was being offered to them, so God sent for others who would.

Listen carefully, you're about to hear something from me that you will not often hear, and that's a sports analogy¹...God, much like a coach, found it necessary to change the lineup. If players become despondent or are losing interest or lack the needed energy, new players are required. The old players are benched. It's easy for us to regard the invited guests only as the Israelites and Christians as the ones who were later gathered in the streets, but it would be robbing this parable of its richness. There are some Christians who want to experience the soft and safe side of discipleship but not do the really hard work of outreach and social justice. They want God's blessings but not share in ministering to others. They want world hunger to end but are not willing to work towards that goal. There are others who are willing to accept God's invitation if the expected invitees are not.

We see evidence in the United States and in Western Europe of a general lack of interest in organized religion, yet in Africa, Asia and Latin America, churches are growing by leaps and bounds. If we as post-modern Westerners are unwilling to accept God's invitation, there are plenty of other people on the sidelines. God is not dead, as has been conjectured in the press for the past several decades, it's the passion and zeal of Western church goers that seems to have died.

There are very few human institutions that are willing to accept anyone who walks in the door. Yale University, for example, received 26,000 applications for its class of 2013. Only 7.5

¹ Marvin A. McMickle, "Proper 23: Matthew 22:1-14", *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2011), 167.

percent of that number were actually accepted.² Even public universities rarely accept more than 60 percent of those applying for admission. Thank goodness that God isn't on college admissions' boards, because everyone would be invited to attend.

And in the parable God did invite everyone to attend the wedding feast. Verse 10 of the reading indicates that the king's slaves went out into the streets and gathered *all* whom they found, both good and bad. This gives us all hope, yet it has nothing to do with our merit, rather God's mercy. Strangely, in verses 11-14, we see that not all of the second batch of guests are allowed to stay. The guest without a wedding robe is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness.

It might be hard for us today to understand this concern about proper attire. After all, people wearing jeans to the opera and tennis shoes to the Academy Awards scarcely turn heads nowadays. What dressing up for an occasion actually indicates is not an attempt to show off by putting on airs, rather it shows respect for the event or the person who invited you. The important aspect of this is that it goes beyond the clothes themselves. There are garments of the mind and heart reflected in the garments that we put on our bodies. The intangible garments of expectation, humble penitence, faith, and reverence are what we need to prepare ourselves to approach God.³ We need this preparation in order to accept God's invitation, otherwise it is wasted, and we will end up in the outer darkness ourselves.

It is precisely *this* that is the Good News of the Gospel, namely that Jesus Christ invites us all to be saved and enjoy eternal life. Though many might be called, the ones who are chosen are those who respond by living in a new way. Paul said it best in his letter to the church in Colossae, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Col. 3:11-15)" Amen.

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² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, volume 2, revised ed.*, (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1975), 268-271.