

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

This morning's parable begins with joyous preparation and a gracious invitation to a wedding reception, and ends in "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

What's going on here?

I *love* the way it begins! "The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to all those who had been invited..."

Anyone who has attended or planned a wedding knows the excitement of the planning, the preparing, the selecting of just the right elements to make this particular wedding unique. I am referring not to the actual wedding service, of course – the heart of the thing -- which takes about 60-90 minutes with the pastor to plan. I'm talking about the reception/banquet which usually takes the couple and whatever mothers are involved at least a year, if not more. People ask me how long it will take to plan their wedding. I answer by asking one question: "How long do you have?" And whatever amount of time they say – 1 month, 6 months, a year, a year-and-a-half, I reply, "That's how long it will take."

We often save for years anticipating the cost; we take great pains to ensure a memorable time – plenty of just the right good food, good music, seating which will do all but guarantee that no one will be bored or alone. The kind of event where people check their watches and calendars at the door because who attends a celebration, a banquet, with the attitude: "They owe it to me that this free banquet – music, meal, and speeches – be finished in 60 minutes or less, or I'm going to let them hear about it." The attitude is far more festive than that! Par-tay! Par-tay! Par-tay!

Attending such a banquet – free, no charge – is not a duty, but an honor!

But before this thought is even finished, Jesus adds, "...but those who were invited *would not come*."

Now the grammar is very clear here. It isn't "*could not come*" "didn't know about it soon enough," or, "knew about it but forgot," but "*they were not willing to come*." Very willful.

Those who were invited did not view the invitation as an honor or a privilege at all, even though it came from the king himself and would cost them absolutely nothing but their time. For whatever reason, not given in the text, they would not come.

So the king, being a rather gracious fellow, tries a different approach. He sends other slaves to those on the guest list for a second time, and instructs them to

say, “I have prepared the dinner; everything is ready; all you have to do is come! Come to the wedding banquet!” You have to admire the king’s lavish hospitality, and his deep desire that these people come and join in the wedding celebration of his son! I mean, we’re talking *good* food, food they won’t find *anywhere* else, food they certainly couldn’t afford to buy. We’re not talkin’ Spam here. We’re talking fatted calves, prime rib cooked to perfection, leg of lamb. Food only the king could provide and prepare for so many at one time.

Nevertheless, those who were invited “disregarded, ignored, paid no attention to, didn’t give squat about” it and went away – one to his farm, another to his business...fill in the blank, any preoccupation that one might feel is more important than the king’s invitation to this most important celebration for his son. In fact, they almost seem *offended* by the invitation. They seize the king’s messengers, mistreat them, and kill them. A rather severe way to tell the King, “No means no.”

Keep in mind that when Jesus lived, there was Sabbath worship on Saturday for those of Jewish descent and faith; but there was no Christian worship or *church* yet, no Communion/ Holy Supper. None of that came into being until Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension. So this is not a “go to church or go to hell” parable.

Like last week’s parable, this morning’s parable, tells about the love of the divine King, of God, who tries time and again to welcome the people he rules and loves into his presence, even offering them a banquet of all they could desire, the people who do everything from ignoring the invitation, to killing all of his messengers as, in reality, they killed God’s prophets.

But remember what Jesus says as he begins this parable. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to *this scenario*. In other words, the Kingdom of God is not some kind of annoying intrusion into our infinitely more important personal concerns. Serious matters are at stake here.

In our haste to proclaim that God is gracious, which God truly is – and we see that grace in the king’s repeated invitation to his invited guests, even *after* they so rudely refuse him; and then throwing open the doors to any- and everyone, good and bad – we see that perhaps we have been guilty of proclaiming the cheap grace which Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany so despised: an attitude toward God which leaves us thinking we can manipulate God according to *our* wills and *our* preferences, as if God’s will was something negative or harmful to us. Throughout human history, God’s beloved human beings have done just what these parables describe – and it hasn’t worked out so well for us, has it.

The gospel is a gracious, forgiving message from a loving God, a passionately loving God. Who but a passionate God would finally give *his own life* for a bunch of sinners like us?

But the gospel is also an awesome, powerful Word – a word like no other – a word which changes everything about us, and about the way we see the world and other people. It unmasks our idolatries, it illuminates the dark corners of our hearts and lays bare our self-preoccupation. It calls us to repentance and yes, parables like this DO judge us, do stop us in our tracks and cause us to *think*. Responding to God’s invitation isn’t a blind, knee-jerk response. It’s a daily decision, one which Martin Luther made when, every morning, he recalled his baptism where God claimed him and made him God’s own. He then tried to live that day as a response to that claim, giving witness to that sacred relationship.

Even our brother Martin didn’t always get it right. Even in the midst of the history he was making, and the great, enduring discoveries he made in Scripture about the *unconditional* love and grace of God, on any given day he sinned/betrayed that relationship just like we all do.

Jesus’ parable this morning also teaches us that neither being good nor being bad is the ultimate qualification for being a guest, and that (thank the Lord) we are not the ones to judge that, as the king sends out more messengers and invites everyone.

The Kingdom of God is no casual come and go affair. It is true that we are free to come or not to come; we are free to run our lives pretty much as we choose. That’s what we call “free will” which, when you think about it, God took quite a risk to grant us. That is also why God/Christ died: to rescue us from the dark side of our free will.

This morning we share this Feast of Victory for our God, a *foretaste*, an appetizer if you will, of the Feast to come, by Christ’s own invitation. It is an occasion for rejoicing and celebrating, as Jesus gives us his very self in, with, and under the bread and wine. Let us receive it as the sacred gift that it is – with joy and thanksgiving. Then let this meal be an encouragement to us in our life in Christ, that our daily lives also may bear witness to the gracious and joyful relationship God has established with us. Amen.

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