

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
An Open Invitation – A Sermon on Matthew 22:1-14

Have you ever received an invitation to a party you really did not want to attend? What did you do about that? I'll bet you didn't mistreat, abuse, and murder the mailman. That's what happens in this parable.

Have you ever invited people to your party who did not attend? You cleaned, you cooked, you decorated. The table was set, the candles were lit, the music was playing - everything was ready but some of the guests didn't come. Did it make you so angry that you killed them and burned down their houses? Probably not, but that's what happens in this parable. It's a hyperbole – a gross exaggeration.

This wedding party began as convention dictates. A first invitation (a sort of "Save the date!" notice), followed by the summons carried by the king's servants when the banquet is ready. Then things start to fall apart.

First, the invited guests simply refuse to come, and when the second call comes, they treat the invitation as a joke and go about their business. More than bad manners are at stake - some invitees even assault and kill the servants. In his anger the king then escalates the confrontation by sending in his troops to destroy the perpetrators and their city. Apparently the king has judged their bad behavior to be the opening salvo of a rebellion that must be quelled, even at the cost of a portion of the king's own holdings.

With the party ready, the king is determined that it will go forward, and so the servants are sent out again, this time to the very limits of the king's territory - to bring in everyone, "good and bad," so that the hall will be filled. **When the king plans a party, the party will go on!**

This parable is so outrageous, so shocking, that it begs to be taken seriously but **NOT** literally. It begs to be taken as truth not as historical fact. Besides, to hear this parable and conclude that God is an angry king who, if he doesn't get his way, destroys his own people and burns their cities simply does not fit with the God revealed to us by Jesus.

This is a parable of judgment, but maybe not be the judgment we think it is. Speaking about the first group of guests the king says, "Those invited were not worthy." By implication those in the second-invited group were worthy. We tend to get nervous and fearful when God begins making judgments. It leaves us wondering whether we are in the first group or the second group. Are we unworthy or are we worthy?

I suspect our nervousness and fear about God's judgments arise from the assumption that God judges us in the same way we so often judge others. More often than not our judgments of others are judgments of exclusion. What if it's just the opposite with God? What if Jesus is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven is not business as usual according to our standards? What if God's judgment on our lives is one of grace, acceptance, and invitation; a judgment of inclusion?

If that's true, then what separates or distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second? **The difference isn't that one was more deserving than the other.** The first-invited guests were the recipients of the king's invitation and favor. But so were the second-invited guests. And so was the man who showed up without proper wedding clothes. They were all invited. They were all favored. None of them had done anything to earn or deserve an invitation. It was just given. **If that's true for them, it's true for us.**

The difference isn't that the king likes one group more than the other group. His sole motivation is to share his banquet. He wants someone, anyone, everyone, to join in his joy and celebration, and be a part of his kingdom and life. Both groups were given the same opportunity. **If that's true for them, it's true for us.**

The difference isn't that some guests are good and others are bad. There's no distinction made based upon behavior, beliefs, attitudes, or morals. To the contrary, with the second round of invitations the king sends his servants into the main streets with the instruction to "invite everyone you find." And they "went out into the streets and gathered everyone they found, both good and bad." **If that's true for them, it's true for us.**

There's only one thing that distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second-invited guests. Presence. The second-invited guests showed up. The first-invited guests did not. The "wedding hall was filled" with the second-invited guests but the first-invited guests "would not come." That's the only difference between the two groups.

The key to our life in God is to just show up, to be present. That's a lot easier said than done. To be present is difficult work. Think how difficult it is to be present to another person.

It means establishing the other person as our priority, seeing them for who they are and not who we want them to be or think they should be. It means opening ourselves to receive their life into our own. It means the vulnerability of entrusting and giving our life to the other.

It means really listening to what they say and not just what we hear or want to hear, letting go of our own agendas, distractions, fears, and prejudices. It means bringing and offering all that we are and all that we have.

If we're not doing that with others we're probably not doing it with God. Instead, we too often go our separate ways, to our farms and businesses. We're too busy, too tired, too distracted. There's work to be done and money to be made. We make light of the other's life and what is being offered. If we don't earn it or work for it we assume it has no value. After all you get what you pay for, right? We're convinced we have better things to do and better places to be. That's what the first-invited group did. What they didn't realize...what we sometimes don't realize, is there is no life outside the banquet, the kingdom.

To show up and be present is to be worthy before God. It's that simple and it's that difficult. We don't earn or prove our worthiness as a prerequisite to entering the banquet. We show up, be present, and discover for ourselves the worthiness God has always known about us. That's when our lives begin to change.

But what about the guy who showed up without proper wedding clothes? This is about more than just a dress code violation. Something else was missing. "He was speechless." It was as if he wasn't really there. Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we're not really present. **Our body is there but in our mind we've left the room.**

So...what if this man had said something, anything? What if he had just made his presence known, not so much to the king but to himself? What if he had said:

- I was hungry. I smelled the food. I trusted you to feed me.
- I was lonely. I saw the lights on. I trusted you to take me in.
- I was thirsty. I knew there would be wine. I trusted you to give me a drink.

What if he had said any one of those or a thousand others things like them? It would have been enough. He would have shown up with all that he was and all that had. He would've been present. **Then the king would have said to him, "Dear friend, I'm so glad you got my invitation. I'm so glad you are here. You are worthy."**

And if that's true for him, then it's true for us.

The last 30 days, we have lost three members of our community – Pat Rooney, Marilyn Bell and Polly Lauer. Each of them was true to their spiritual roots in their own way. Each received an invitation to the wedding feast and each was dressed in their Sunday (wedding) best when they arrived for the banquet. **And the king welcomed them into the banquet hall because they accepted the invitation and were totally present to God.**

We have all received an invitation to the feast. How will we respond to the wedding invitation? Will we accept? **And will we be totally present to GOD and be welcomed to the feast?**

Deacon Greg Cecere

October 15, 2017

(Sermon is from Fr Michael K. Marsh / October 12, 2014)