

“The Invitation Situation”

Matthew 22:1 – 14

October 15, 2017

19th Sunday after Pentecost

An invitation to a prestigious event, like a banquet or party, hosted by a celebrity (movie star, athlete, etc.), a wealthy leader of business, or an important head of state, like the president, used to be an honor and a privilege to receive. The invitation often detailed the lavish preparations made for the event: the food and drink, the entertainment, and, perhaps, a listing of some of the other celebrities and famous people who will be there. In the old days, such events were so prestigious that proper attire was prescribed for them (a black tie affair, for example). Common sense would tell you that, when you receive such an invitation, you eagerly accept that invitation, go to the event to which you have been invited, and simply enjoy the night of eating, drinking, partying, and so on which has been prepared for you.

However, today, it may not be unusual for such an invitation to be declined or even simply ignored. We might wonder why such magnificent invitations would not be accepted and enjoyed. How could people do this? But that’s the new etiquette for today, I guess. People actually react this way to some of the most important and prestigious events ever planned.

It’s what they did in our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus tells yet another parable to teach the people. It is the story of a very special event. A king plans a royal wedding banquet for his son. He plans to invite all the subjects of the kingdom, not in order to make them his subjects, but because they already were his subjects. He wanted very much to feast with his people and he wanted to do it right. In other words, the subjects of this king did not have to earn their way into the banquet or pay for the banquet. The king invited them out of his great kindness and he, the king, paid for everything himself.

To be invited to the wedding feast of the king’s son was a high honor. However, you certainly can’t tell it from the reaction of the subjects in the story. When all the preparations were complete, the king sent his servants to call those who had been invited by saying, “Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”

What did the subjects do? Did they gratefully acknowledge the invitation? Did they immediately drop everything, dress up in the wedding clothes, and rush to the celebration prepared for them? Not even close. Amazingly, they paid no attention to the invitation. They returned to their regular jobs, be it as a farmer or a businessman. Apparently, work was more important than the banquet. Even more amazing is the fact that some of the subjects seized the servants who brought the message, treated them shamefully and ended up killing them. This is unbelievable! This is the most egregious example of poor etiquette. These people spurn the generosity of the king! They reject this gracious gift by ignoring him and his invitation in favor of other things which are more important. In addition, they actively attack the messengers for some unknown reason.

In addition to that, we read, at the end of the lesson, about one man who decided to come, but not according to the invitation of the king. He is the first recorded “wedding crasher”. He tries to get into the wedding on his own terms rather than the stipulations in the invitation. Instead of wearing the festive wedding garments, proper for a celebration such as this, he tries to sneak into the wedding by wearing clothes of his own choosing which were probably of lesser value than wedding garments. The King is shocked to see

him and says, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" This wedding crasher is just as shocked to see the King and has nothing to say in response.

What is the king's reaction? He can't just let this breach of etiquette go. He is furious! He is so angry at the first group of subjects that he sends his troops in to destroy those ungrateful servants and burn their city. He so mad at the wedding crasher that he orders him to be bound hand and foot and cast out of the wedding hall into outer darkness, a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

However, His anger does not cancel out his kindness and generosity. The king still has a need and desire to give and that need will be fulfilled, even if the previous subjects had blown it. He sends his servants out to randomly invite any people, both good and bad people, to come to his feast. He he tells his servants to go out to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you could find. Eventually the wedding hall is filled with guest.

Now we look at this parable and think, "How stupid! How utterly insane!" These people have received an invitation to an event, bought and paid for by their sovereign, which will likely be the greatest opportunity of their lives. However, they pay no attention to the servants announcing the feast. They have better things to do with their time, like work. And, they don't just ignore the messenger, they kill the messenger. They actively oppose the king's generosity and reject His magnanimous gift.

This parable might be considered laughable if it were not based on a real situation. Jesus' parable describes the Jewish people and their reactions to God's undeserved love for them. God had prepared, not a wedding feast, but the eternal salvation of the Jewish people. He did not do this to make them His people, nor did the Jewish people earn or deserve this great favor. God did this solely out of his merciful love and desire to celebrate with them.

After Adam and Eve had rejected the Lord's invitation to live in righteousness and peace with Him and with each other, God condemned their sin. Yet, He promised a Savior who would come and rescue them from the outer darkness of death and the gnashing of teeth of hell. For thousands of years, the Lord planned this rescue. He sent prophets throughout the centuries who spoke his Word about the coming Messiah and the kingdom of heaven which would come by Him.

Finally, when the Messiah did come to free them from the guilt of their sin by living a holy life in their place; to spare them from that punishment for their transgressions by dying a brutal death on the cross in their place; and to prepare a feast (described for us in our Old Testament reading for today) where death shall be swallowed up once and for all and there will only be life by Himself rising from the grave to live again, many of God's people – the Jews – were not interested. Instead, they went on with their day-to-day life. Some beat the messengers, killed some of them, and ended up killing the Messiah Himself, Jesus, the only Son of God. They ignored God's generosity, rejected His free gift, and tried to gain access to the kingdom by their own good works.

What is God's reaction? Do you expect no reaction? Do you expect God to just let things go? God, like the King in our story is furious when people spurn his generosity and reject His gift. No, He vigorously punishes those who do that. For those who rejected the prophets' announcement of God's kingdom coming and even rough them up or kill them, He destroyed the nation and sent them off into exile in Assyria and in Babylon. For those who try to gain access to God and His salvation through their own religious efforts (such

as the Pharisees), God rejects them. For those who rejected the Messiah Himself by not believing in Him or by killing Him on a cross, God sent his the Roman troops in to destroy the nation, burn the Temple, and destroy the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D.

We may react to such stories of the Jewish people in the same way that we react to the parable that Jesus told: How stupid! How utterly insane! To be offered God's kindness and to reject His gifts promised through the Messiah is just plain crazy. .

Our reaction might have some credibility or might be taken seriously if it were not for the fact that Jesus is telling this parable against us, too. Like the King in our story, God has prepared a wonderful wedding banquet for His Son. The book of Revelation calls it, "the marriage supper of the Lamb," (Rev. 19: 9). This will be the biggest and best party that has ever happened. It will be life as God always intended for it to be in the Garden of Eden. There will be no more sin, sorrow, or sadness. There will be only righteousness, joy, and happiness. There will be no more death or separation from God. There will be only life and an intimate union with God and with God's people. And, unlike any other party which always has to end, this party will go on for all eternity.

God does not make this wedding banquet in order to make us His people. He prepares this party for those who are already His people by faith in Jesus Christ has already paid for this party by obeying the Law for us; suffered the punishment for all of our transgressions; and who Himself has already conquered death and lives. Free admission to the party of parties has already been won by Jesus and given to us in our baptism. We do not have to merit God's favor, nor do we have to earn our admission into the banquet by all the good which we have done. It is all given to us freely by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by virtue of his death and resurrection.

How do you (not unbelieving sinners, but you) react to this great preparation and this wonderful invitation? Many Christians today are as apathetic as the servants in Jesus parable. We don't value our relationship with God or the gifts He has to give us (forgiveness, peace, new life, and salvation). As a result, when God sends his servants to announce that the marriage feast of the Lamb awaits and is being celebrated right here in the house of God, many just don't care.

Others are busy with other priorities and things more important to them. It may be their jobs like the King's subjects in the parable. More likely, these days it is probably some sort of pleasure. It could be friends or family or any number of things that cause us, like the subjects in the parable, to simply refuse God's great invitation by our actions.

Some individuals may attempt to bridge the gap between themselves and the marriage supper of the Lamb by their own personal piety. They may try to crash this wedding by depending upon their own goodness. Other individuals may violently rebel against the word of God's servants by ignoring the Word of God; persecuting the messengers who bring the Word of God; or by substituting a different message than the Word of God.

What will be God's reaction to this? Do we think all this "wrath of God" stuff is just an Old Testament concept? Do we think that God will simply allow us to Ignore his invitation? Do we believe that once someone is saved, then they are always saved and it doesn't matter what they do? Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, God punishes His own people when they exhibit this behavior. Do we believe that God will treat us differently? Can such things as, "But I believe in God,"; our confirmation; our membership in a church; or any other thing that we do will prevent God from carrying out

his righteous wrath against even us? Will God destroy His faithless people? Will God give the banquet to others instead of us as the king did in the parable?

What's our reaction to this story? It's not so easy to react to a story if it's told about you and me. It's a little bit more difficult to evaluate a story told about us than evaluating the story of the people of Israel. This story can be very disturbing to us. However, this is still a story of warning and a story of hope.

The warning, obviously, is to not do what either the wicked subjects or the wedding crasher did. Many of you remember the popular radio commentator, Paul Harvey, who ran a feature called "The Rest of the Story," in which he added information to a story to make it meaningful. Maybe, in this story, we need less information to make it meaningful. Simply say that this story is about "a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast."

In other words, look to the wedding feast itself and not to the unworthy invitees. Remember that our Heavenly Father has prepared "the marriage supper of the Lamb" for us to enjoy. As important as many of the things in our lives are, remember that this is far more important. As pleasurable as many of the things in our lives are, remember that this feast is far more pleasurable. As long as many of the valuable things in our lives last, remember that this feast lasts forever.

Repent of any and all times in which you have refused the invitation of God's servants to attend the banquet which is already beginning in our congregation and, instead, ignored God's invitation, valued something more highly than God's invitation, or vigorously rejected and opposed God's invitation. Instead, as the old civil rights slogan went, "keep your eyes on the prize." For what God has coming to you is far more important, pleasurable, lasting than anything you have here.

And remember this: God has prepared a foretaste of the feast to come in our banquet on the altar of Jesus' body and Jesus' blood in Holy Communion. Here, you get a brief taste now of what God is preparing for you in the future. It's like an appetizer. An appetizer tastes good, but, more importantly, its purpose is to make you hungry for the main course which is coming. Here, at the Lord's Table, you receive you receive a taste of God's holiness, His perfect love, fellowship with all of God's people past, present, and future, and peace which shall never be broken. As you prepare for the feast, come to the foretaste, the appetizer, to stir your desire for what is to come by living life in the here and now.

The situation with the invitation is this: the wedding feast of God's Son has been prepared. Invited to this event of all eternity are God's people of every age. That means you and that means me. There is no cost or merit required on your part. The cost is been paid for by the blood of the Lamb shed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. His merit is sufficient to prepare you for this celebration. You don't have to be a wedding crasher and try to get in on the basis of your own efforts or worth. Rather, rejoice as the prophet Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Is. 61:10) He has not only prepared the feast for you, but he has prepared you for the feast. He has given you a foretaste of the feast to come now. He will come and bring you to the entire meal. And that celebration – one that we cannot even imagine – will last forever. Amen