

WILL YOU ACCEPT JESUS' INVITATION?

Matthew 22:1-14 October 1, 2017

Today's Gospel includes one very strange parable. Some New Testament scholars suggest that Matthew may have combined several parables into what we know as the Parable of the Wedding Feast, which may explain why the story seems disjointed.

The beginning is simple enough. A king is preparing a wedding banquet for his son, one of the most joyful occasions imaginable. But, oddly, those who were invited refuse to come. Apparently, all of them refuse.

In response, the king tries to make the banquet more appealing by telling the prospective guests what food will be awaiting them. Still no one comes. In fact, some of those invited kill the servants who have come on the king's behalf, which seems more than a little bizarre. At this point the reader of Matthew is wondering: How did this story get so dark?

It gets darker still. The infuriated king sends out his army to track down the murderers and level their cities. Next, apparently having moved past his anger, the king has his servants go into the streets and invite anyone they can find. But when the king arrives at his banquet, he sees a man without the traditional wedding garment. The king orders his servants to tie up this guest and throw him out.

But how, the reader will wonder, was the wedding guest supposed to get a garment at such short notice? You also have to wonder what the married son and his new wife think about all this. Probably not the wedding reception that they had hoped for.

So the king, having found out who TRULY were his friends, sends his servants out to invite anyone they found in the street. These people invited were

commoners, slaves, servants and merchants. They were honest and hardworking people, but also, according to the Scripture, bad people, criminals and thieves. Anyone who happened to be on the street was invited to come to this delicious, feast of abundance.

Now, this parable from Jesus is not really about a wedding feast, but a story about the salvation that is available if you follow Jesus. The king represents God, who asks each and every one of us to come into his kingdom...no matter what our situation in life, what we have done in the past. The Kingdom of Heaven is not limited to only the 'good' people or the Jewish people. Heaven is open to all of us.

But...there are some conditions for entry to the Kingdom of Heaven. The scripture says that there was one man who did not have a wedding robe. But this doesn't refer to a piece of clothing—that just doesn't make sense since the king's servants went out onto the street and hauled in everyone they could find. Obviously, no one was dressed for the wedding.

This 'robe' is the ROBE OF SALVATION, which we all get when we give our lives to Jesus...when all our sins are forgiven and we are clean and spotless.

In Isaiah 6:10, we are told that when we accept Christ we are clothed with the garments of salvation, and He has wrapped us with a robe of righteousness. It is God who clothes us. Nothing that we do can possibly be enough to earn us salvation or righteousness. Only God can cleanse us from iniquity and cause us to be truly blameless, or righteous. But we have a choice—we can choose to accept Christ and wear the 'wedding robe' or we can choose not to. It is solely up to each one of us.

Today we have made the choice to observe Bread for the World

Sunday. This is an opportunity to join others in praying for those who struggle with hunger—and to rededicate ourselves to efforts that help end hunger. Our prayerful work to end hunger is a response to the Gospel’s invitation to take part in the banquet of God’s mercy and abundance that is ours through Jesus Christ.

Our prayers are especially urgent at this time. South Sudan is suffering from a devastating famine, and famine threatens Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen. Drought is spreading throughout other parts of Africa. The hurricanes that have devastated areas in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico are on many news channels notifying us of the needs in those areas. Humanitarian assistance and long-term solutions to hunger are more important than ever.

In the United States, Congress is making budget decisions that will affect the lives of millions in our own country and abroad. Unprecedented budget cuts have been proposed that target international and domestic programs vital to hungry people. Dismantling or cutting funding for these time-tested and life-saving programs would take us backward and make the goal of ending hunger by 2030 unlikely.

Today and in the months to come, we are asked to pray for all those who suffer from hunger, need, or injustice. We pray also for our elected leaders that they might govern with wisdom and make ending hunger—in our own country and around the world—a national priority. And we pray that we will be led to using our influence to urge our nation’s leaders to strengthen U.S. leadership in achieving the international goal of ending hunger by 2030.

Our faith is in Christ, who makes all things new, and we place our hope in God’s vision of a world without hunger.

So, overall, what is going on with our text today? What was Matthew’s

and Jesus' larger point?

Mainly, it was about responding to an invitation. And, more importantly, the way you respond.

All of us know Jesus' invitation into the reign of God. All are invited. Yet that invitation requires us to do something. It requires us to put Jesus' words into action. It's not enough to say that you've accepted Christ. That is, it's not enough to say that you've accepted the invitation. You have to come to the feast and wear the right garment. In other words, you have to *show* that you've accepted the invitation.

An old Baptist preacher's story tells of a parishioner who greeted his minister at the close of the service with the same observation, Sunday after Sunday: "You really gave it to them today, Preacher!" Over time, the minister became concerned that this parishioner never seemed to consider anything in a sermon to be applicable to himself. He always seemed to exult in the fact that the preacher had given it "to them," whoever they happened to be. At long last, there came a Sunday when a heavy snowstorm kept everybody away from church except for the preacher and this particular parishioner. Abandoning the sermon he had already prepared for that morning, the preacher decided to focus exclusively on the sins and shortcomings he had noticed in the life of his singular captive audience. When the sermon and the service were finished, the lone parishioner came to the door and shook the preacher's hand as he did every Sunday. The preacher waited, wondering how this parishioner would react to the blistering sermon he had just heard. "Well, Preacher," the parishioner began, "if they'd been here today, you would really have given it to them!"

What do we have to do to gain admittance to the joyful banquet that God is throwing?

We find one answer three chapters later, in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. There Jesus gives us his decisive test for entrance into the banquet, or into the kingdom of heaven. It all depends on how you treat the "least" of his brothers and sisters. Do you feed the hungry? Clothe the naked? Welcome the stranger? No? Well, then you're just as bad as the people who didn't bother to come to the banquet or the fellow who didn't bother to get dressed.

Most of Jesus' parables focus on the carrot—the rewards of the reign of God. But here Jesus is focusing on the stick—what happens if you don't respond adequately to the invitation.

So which will it be? Are you coming or not?

Please pray with me. Dear Lord, open our eyes and hearts to the wonders of your salvation through Jesus Christ. Please help us to see that we can throw off the rags of our current life and put on shiny white robes through your salvation. May we live our lives on the path to your kingdom. Amen.