

Matthew 22:1-14

This is one parable you won't find in any Sunday school curriculum. It is intended for theologically mature audiences. Several elements in Matthew's story of the wedding feast seem way over the top by any measure of civil, rational behaviour. Matthew's Jesus directs the parable to the chief priests and elders of Jerusalem as well as Israel's political leaders, the very people who will arrest him and hand him over for execution.

The authority of Israel's traditional leaders was no longer valid in light of their rejection of Jesus. With their call to serve God poisoned by a sense of entitlement, they can no longer discern God's will, even when it is presented by God's own Son.

A certain congregation, known for its fine liturgy and music also had a pre-pandemic reputation for having one of the best coffee hours going. Immediately after the worship service, worshippers would stream over to the coffee hour to enjoy the fellowship and the bountifully provided refreshments. In this parish, the attention paid to what happens after worship gives credence to the belief that, among Lutherans, coffee hour is the third sacrament. The secret behind this weekly spread is that all members receive a coffee-hour assignment when they receive their membership certificate. So, everyone has a share in this second-order "work of the people."

Each Sunday the fare is rich. There are home-baked cakes and cookies. For those who are hungrier, there are open-faced sandwiches and chips and dips. Once a month there is even pizza! Then there is the fresh fruit for the calorie-conscious and a children's table where punch is served in unbreakable cups and kids can reach some less-sticky offerings. There is coffee and tea; caffeinated, decaffeinated, herbal, and punch. This weekly post-Eucharist banquet may not be as extravagant as a wedding banquet, but it is a real party. The coffee hour takes place right after the eleven o'clock worship service, and of course everyone is invited. Virtually all the worshippers participate. Even some people who did not make it to the service come to the coffee hour!

This latter situation, however, is a source of consternation for some of the church members, and for one strong-willed Dutchman in particular, who feel rather strongly that his coffee hour should not become an open house party for the whole city. They feel it should not be a free feeding-station for some of the street people who come ill-clad and strong-smelling to fill their faces with the lovingly prepared food. The coffee hour, they protest, is for those who have been to worship, so they may enjoy their fellowship with one another on this special day of the week.

Other members of the church, by contrast, and another outspoken Dutchman in particular, say, "If we cannot give some food to these people who are hungry - what good is it that we come here and pray? What does it mean if we pray in the church and then right afterward we

cannot even accommodate ourselves to feed these people? All have to be welcome. We cannot turn them away."

So, the lines are drawn. Who is welcome to the feast? The question of who is welcome at the feast seems to be the issue in Jesus' parable. Jesus tells a story about a king who pulls out all the stops to throw a tremendous party to celebrate the wedding of his son. This is not what some people think of as Sunday worship - a come-whenever-you-are-able affair. Rather, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. This is the social event, not of the week, but of a lifetime. It is a party to end all parties. After all, how many times in a lifetime does the chance come to attend a royal wedding feast?

Because Jesus begins his story with "The kingdom of heaven may be compared with...", we are alerted to the fact that the wedding behind the wedding of which Jesus speaks is nothing less than the wedding of heaven and earth, the betrothal of God to humankind and humankind to God in the Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is speaking of "the great and promised feast" for which we pray weekly, "when Christ will come again as victorious Lord of all."

For this unprecedented extravagance the king sends out servants to invite the privileged guests. Apparently only certain persons are to be so honoured. "Aah," I can hear the strong-willed Dutchman mumbling in the back pew, "You see? Only certain guests are invited - Not everyone!"

"Yes," his compatriot retorts, "but watch how the privileged intended guests responded!"

We are mystified by the behaviour of the characters in this bizarre little story. The initial invitation to the feast in honour of the kings' son is met with rejection. The king is snubbed by *everyone*. In the honour-based social system of antiquity, it would be unthinkable for invited guests, who were from the upper tiers of society and under social and financial obligation to the king, to refuse his invitation. At this point, the king is faced with a tremendous amount of shame, that by ancient standards, must be remedied. He needs to find a way to save face. Surprisingly and unexpectedly, the king graciously extends a second invitation, sweetening the deal with descriptions of the elaborate preparations, the royal equivalent to begging on one's knees. You must come! You don't know what you're missing! It's going to be a great feast! The king really wants *these* people at the party. But those invited are apparently unimpressed, and return to business as usual.

Again, this is unusual behaviour, but it's the kind of strangeness we can expect in one of Jesus' parables. With the second, more urgent invitation, those on the original royal guest list acted with even greater contempt. Things go completely off the rails. We watch in horror as the servants sent by the king to announce the party are seized, abused, and murdered.

Their insolence toward the king and their shameful treatment and murder of his slaves constitutes an open revolt. We didn't see *that* coming! How did the stakes suddenly get so high? And the weirdness and violence are just getting started. In retaliation, the king goes to war against his own people. Enraged by their actions, he unleashes an army. Before we know it, the murderers themselves are murdered, and a city, presumably the king's own city, is a pile of smoldering ash.

But then, things get even more outlandish. With heads still spinning, we learn that the dinner is still on! The invitation goes out once again, this time to commoners on the "main street" of the destroyed city. Apparently, while soldiers pillaged and slashed, and as great flames devoured the buildings outside the palace walls, little Sterno burners toiled away silently under the sumptuous dishes in the great hall, keeping the meal hot for the eventual guests!

The historical context of today's parable from Matthew's gospel is quite clear. The first people to be invited to the wedding feast, but who refused, stood for the Jews. Those from the 'crossroads,' who accepted the invitation, stood for the Gentiles. The banquet was the Kingdom of God. This parable, once again, made the Jewish leaders very angry. It implied that the Gentiles were about to occupy seats at the banquet which they had always believed were reserved for themselves alone.

Now everyone is invited. Now the doors of the kingdom are thrown open.

The invitation to the marriage feast is extended to everyone who will come, without exception. Now your name need not appear on an official list. You need not check in at the door. Please come in. The door to this lavish affair is thrown wide open.

Here is a party that you do not have to deserve. The dignitaries have lost their privilege. Protocol is thrown to the wind. It is a state dinner at the Governor General's mansion, but it might as well be a soup kitchen in its clientele. There is no questionnaire to fill out, no inquisition about your moral behaviour. Jesus says that the hall is packed with guests, "both bad and good." There is not even the usual intake interview required by the community emergency food bank. And, amazing! It is completely free. It is not like one of those fancy balls or banquets you would love to go to but the tickets are \$300.

Now, we all know that an invitation to a wedding as well as the reception, carries with it an understood social obligation to bring a gift. But, here even that obligation is set aside in the extraordinary largesse of a royal wedding feast. An invitation is presented with your name on it. All you need to do is to say, "Yes, of course!" and come. Just say yes!

God is throwing a party. It is already under way. The band has finished tuning up and is getting into the swing of things. The hot hors d'oeuvres are fresh out of the oven. God is throwing a party. You are invited. Just say yes. But, what does it mean to say yes, to accept God's invitation?

Jesus would have us reflect today on what it might mean to actually and truthfully say yes to God's invitation. Jesus' parable concludes not with the whole world making merry at the feast, but rather with the ejection from the party of a certain guest. The king's bouncers throw out a person who came to the feast but did not wholeheartedly enter into the occasion.

Here was a guest who, like the vineyard owner's son in one of Jesus' previous parables, *said* yes but did not *do* yes. The guest came to the feast. After all, everyone was invited. The guest presumed upon the king's graciousness and failed to enter fully into what the occasion called for. The missing wedding garment was a sign of a missing commitment, a lack of wholeheartedness. How are we today responding to God's invitation? Have we said yes? Have we *said* yes that really *means* yes? The party that Jesus has in mind is open to all, without exception. However, this is not to everyone's taste.

There was a mortally ill woman protesting to her pastor that if people who had been mean to her were going to be in heaven, then she did not want to go there. But, the party is God's - not ours. At God's party we do not get to choose our fellow guests. I do not doubt that we would be far more stringent than God is.

After the South African government had finally opened up negotiations with banned opponents, Lutheran pastor T. Simon Farasani found

himself riding in an elevator in a downtown Lusaka hotel with the very same South African military officer who had five years earlier presided over Pastor Farasani's brutal and body-breaking torture in a South African prison. "Well," the white officer addressed him, "perhaps we are brothers after all, what do you think?"

"When Jesus said that in my Father's house are many rooms," Pastor Farasani now preaches, "if you would be able to visit some of those rooms, you would be surprised to see who some of those people are! Perhaps I would find that white officer there. And you might be surprised who you would find."

We do not get to choose our fellow guests. All we get to choose is how we ourselves will respond to God's invitation. When our response to the invitation is "Hell, no, we won't go," God takes us at our word. This is the word of judgment in Jesus' parable. This is a judgment, it is important to notice, that we pronounce on ourselves. After all, everyone is invited.

When by our lives we say no, God suffers our refusal. Unlike Luke's version, Matthew sets this parable of contrasting responses to the kings' invitation in Holy Week, between Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem and his crucifixion. The world's NO takes the form of Jesus' cross. But, this refusal to accept is forever countered by the implacable YES that God uttered on Easter.

Jesus said: "Blessed are those who come to the banquet of life hungering and thirsting for what is right. They will get their fill." The invitation is not something that affects us merely as individuals. It is an invitation to come in from the cold and to be part of a community of brothers and sisters. It is the banquet of the new People of God, namely, the Christian community. Christ is the one who reveals to us that we are brothers and sisters, and introduces us to our heavenly Father. At this banquet all our hungers are satisfied. There is nothing so wonderful in all the world.

All our excuses for refusing to accept God's gracious invitation have not kept God from extending the invitation to us again and again. Indeed, as long as we are alive, the invitation is allowed to stand. But, we do not have forever. The hour is late, but it is not yet too late. There still is time. There is still the present moment. Again, today the invitation is extended. I am not the king. I am only the King's servant. I have been sent to invite you - each one of you - to a party that has no end and has already begun.

Will you come? I mean, will you *really* come? The table is spread. The band is already playing. It is the supper of the Lamb who was slain. Everyone is invited without exception. Will you come? Just say yes!

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT MARCH 12, 2023

As we slow down, breathing in the wonders that are all around us, we give you thanks, Mother of all creation. Amongst the rubble of so much loss we see the joy that bubbles forth. We pray that you will lead us to uncover the truth even when it's painful for us to see. Guide us, and we will follow.

Most holy Friend, you have sent us Jesus to mend that which is broken, to bridge that which is alienated, and to heal that which is diseased. In his name our troubled hearts speak to you, God, of those many people whose needs are great and whose comforts are few. Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you of our concern for places where there is conflict, violence, and misery: war ravaged countries, domestic cruelty, bullying in school grounds, workplace intimidation, gang warfare on streets, or terrorist attacks.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you of our concern for all displaced people: in refugee camps, fugitives from oppression, those crowded on unseaworthy boats, those in our detention centres, and for all separated families and traumatised children.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you of our concern for neighbours, workmates, or members of our own families who are 'doing it tough'; the unemployed and the disabled, some fighting terminal illness, others in despair from broken relationships, some grieving a death, many caught up in predicaments for which there seems no obvious way to a brighter tomorrow. As well, we lift up in prayer the names of those on our hearts, asking for your healing power and loving presence to surround them. Restore wholeness to them in body, mind and spirit.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you of our concern for the church: with its flourishing or weak congregations, some living in comfort and others surviving under persecution, some filled with self-doubt, some with over self-confidence, churches without priests and ministers or those where, sadly, there is conflict between clergy and laity. We pray for women in leadership in our church including Bishop Susan and Bishop Kathy Martin of our ELCIC, and Bishop Linda Nichols and Bishop Anna Greenwood Lee of the Anglican Church in Canada.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you of our concern for equality, respect, and love for all girls and women of the world as we acknowledge the importance of continuing to mark the International Day of Women in the weeks and months ahead. End the suffering and abuse of women who you created in your image. Support the women who are fighting for the equality and rights for all women of the world.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We look with gratitude upon Dalit journalist, Meena Kotwal, who started The Mooknayak (leader of the voiceless), an online news portal which reports everyday atrocities against India's deprived. Despite decades of constitutionally enshrined protections and affirmative action, every year thousands of Dalits are subjected to crimes, including rape, torture, acid attacks, and murder. God of justice, bring your servant, Meena the strength to persevere during times of great adversity. May Meena, and those who work alongside her, use their voices for the good of others.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We are inspired by the Kung Fu nuns who mix meditation with martial arts in Nagarjun, Nepal. It is part of their spiritual mission to achieve gender equality. For as long as scholars of Buddhism remember, women in the Himalayas who sought to practice as spiritual equals with male monks were stigmatized, both by religious leaders and broader social customs. God of strength, clothe the Kung Fu nuns in valor and tenacity as they battle systemic obstacles, in the ongoing battle for equality.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We honor Esther Mwema, an inequalities expert and artist from Zambia. A long-time activist on gendered safety issues, she is the founder of Digital Grassroots, focusing on technology and innovation for gender equality.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We are grateful for The Rev. Becca Stevens, an author, speaker, Episcopal priest, social entrepreneur, founder and president of Thistle Farms in Nashville, Tennessee, USA noted for healing, empowering, and employing female survivors of human trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. God of healing, enfold Becca in your loving embrace as she continues to nurture, heal, and advocate for women.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We give thanks for Fawzia Koofi, Afghan politician, writer, and women's rights activist, who has focused primarily on women's rights: the improvement of women's living conditions in Afghan prisons; the establishment of a commission to combat the issue of violence (especially sexual violence) against children; and the amendment of the Shia personal status law. God of all that is, shine a light for Fawzia who has committed her life to end the atrocities that are happening to the women and girls of her beloved Afghanistan.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We respectfully acknowledge Meaza Ashenafi, the first female Chief Justice of Ethiopia and a trailblazer in many ways, mainly for legal advocacy through her work with Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (EWLA), an organization she co-founded with like-minded young female lawyers. Their work has brought the word 'Sexual Abuse' and 'Sexual Harassment' into the Amharic language, as there were no words to describe them." God of courage, grant Meaza the wisdom to know she is changing the world with the ground-breaking work she is doing.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

Loving Mother and Father of all, bless the lives of these women, and the multitude of unnamed women who go about their daily lives taking courageous steps in support of women's rights and equality. Help them to hold on to the firm belief that they are your beloved daughters, precious in your eyes just as they are. Most Cherished One, we thank you for surrounding us with strong, determined, and courageous women. And, thank you for the men who are also supportive of gender equality and human rights for all.

Loving God, hear our prayers, **Holy Friend, save your people.**

We speak to you now loving God of ourselves: Help us, in our lives, to be transformed by the power of your Holy Spirit, to be shaped in our thoughts; to be purified in our intentions and our feelings; that we might bring our best self to each new day in our relationships, our efforts, our abilities. May we live in gratitude for the blessings of each day and give the best to those around us. When we slide into complacency, nudge us into action. When we feel scared and alone, bring the voices of our ancestors into our hearts. When we witness injustice, fuel us with the truth, and give us the courage to speak out. Through our daily journey as your followers, love us as only a loving parent can.

Amen.

Receive our prayers of adoration, lamentation and thanksgiving. We ask this through your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray ... **Our Father**