

"The Invitation"
October 15, 2017
Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
19th Sunday after Pentecost

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

For many are called, but few are chosen."

Party Time!

Jesus cannot resist. Just when you think he is done, he must tell another parable. This is how he teaches. As we have noticed in the past few weeks, it is his best way of

describing the kingdom of heaven to anyone trying to understand what he means when he proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The Gospel according to Matthew is filled with these teachings. And, as if the people still cannot grasp it, he invents yet another way of illustrating what the kingdom of heaven is like.

So, now he says, "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.*" It's time to throw a party. Time to go all out and celebrate. And so, everybody say, "Opa!" But with various excuses, nobody in the parable can come. The invitations have gone out, the save the dates and the reminders have been sent out. The best foods have been prepared, and the finest musicians are in the house. But the day comes and nobody shows up. And the king is furious.

A Change in Plans

Everything is set. There is a seat here for everyone who was invited. They would be at a king's table. They would feast on the best food in the land. They would drink the best wine. But not only do they not show up because they have better things to do, they kill the servants I send out to gather them in! And so the king destroyed them. And now there would be a change in plans.

The wedding banquet will go on. The king's son will be honored. *Re-heat the food! Pay the musicians overtime!* And the king calls together his servants and tells them, "*Go into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.*" It does not matter who gets invited. Invite everyone. No vetting, not screening, no pre-approvals required. Invite everyone. The invitations that went out before to a select few were ignored and discarded. Now the invitation goes out to anyone you come across in the streets. The rich and the poor, the old and the young, men and women, the religious and the non-religious, oh, and the good AND the bad. Because, there's been a change in plans. Invite everyone.

And so this is what they do. The servants go out and invite everyone they can find, the good and the bad, and soon the wedding hall is filled with guests. There is going to be a party after all. Everyone say "Opa!"

The Invitation

Invitations go out all the time. Invitations for all kinds of things. We receive them. Then we decide if we are going to attend or not. Invitations come in all different ways; some in the mail, some on the phone; some in person, and some through a posting online. However it gets to us, each time we are faced with a decision to go or not go. And several factors go into that decision. There may be an invitation in your house right now that awaits your response.

But in today's parable, in this story we hear in Matthew's gospel, in this vivid picture that Jesus describes about the kingdom of heaven, there's a different kind of invitation. This is *The Invitation*. This is the one that comes with divine timing, from the Center of all beings and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This is the invitation that changes the course of a life. The invitation into the kingdom of heaven is the one you do not want to ignore.

Now, you may have a life-long concept of heaven that makes it a destination in

the afterlife. This is true, but only partially true. When Jesus comes and says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” and then spends most of his time teaching about life in this kingdom, it becomes evident that the kingdom of heaven has already begun to arrive with his life, death and resurrection. This is the reality of Jesus, and what his entrance into humanity has meant to the course of human history. The kingdom he preaches about is already happening. By no means is it complete or fulfilled (just look around at the human condition), and we live in that tension between the already and the not yet. But it has begun and the invitation has gone out. And the wedding hall is filling up, and the party has begun!

The Wedding Robe

Now, in the parable if you are going to the wedding banquet, there is something you are going to need. Do not get caught without it. You must be wearing a wedding robe.

So, the party is in full swing. The food is flying out of the kitchen, the music is lifting everyone’s spirits and everybody say “Opa!” But then there is something wrong, and the music stops, and the place goes quiet, and the king walks over to a man who is not wearing a wedding robe.

“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” The man is speechless.

Do not get caught in the wedding hall without a wedding robe. That man is sent to the place no one wants to go; the place of weeping (sadness) and gnashing of teeth (torture).

So, what is this robe? This piece of clothing, which covers your entire body? This is the thing that keeps you right with the king. The robe of rightness. Or better yet the robe of *Righteousness*.

Isaiah 61:10

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
 my whole being 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 with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Opa! This is the good news! We are talking about Jesus the Christ! We put on that robe and we are like the king’s son, the bridegroom, the one for whom the banquet is put on. We put on that robe and we are putting on Christ. And everything that is wrong with us, all our sin, is covered entirely by that robe. This is the garment that Dante puts on today with his baptism! You see, it was never about what we wear to church on this outer shell. No, it has always been about whether our inner being, our heart, is covered in that robe. What can I say, except do not be caught in the wedding hall without your wedding robe.

But there’s more good news. God is extending that invitation into the kingdom heaven to everyone. And the way to secure a robe is only through God’s grace. It’s

nothing we can get on our own. But God's grace is ever flowing. If you are here today, it is because the Holy Spirit has drawn you. If you were baptized today, it is because the Spirit of God has put it all together. If today you profess faith in Jesus Christ and believe he is who he says he is, it is because the ancient Spirit who was present at the creation of the world has now moved into your heart. And that is the gift of grace.

We Are Sent to Invite

One more thing. As the echoes of "Opa!" ring out from the banquet hall, it is our responsibility now to extend this invitation. Remember the Great Commission that comes at the end of the Gospel of Matthew to the followers of Jesus: *Go out and make disciples of all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.* So, go out and invite everyone, good or bad. God will sort through it all out from there. But time is of the essence. The banquet has begun. The world is hurting, and waiting and needing to hear the good news—for all who will accept the invitation—that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Amen.