

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 You're all invited! (But not everyone is chosen.)
 Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14; Colossians 3:12-14
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 Opening Hymn: Jesus Calls Us O'er The Tumult (Jesus Calls Us),
 Choruses: This Is Amazing Grace, Seek Ye First
 Closing Hymn: There's A Wideness In God's Mercy vs 1-3
 Bell Choir

Last Friday I received an invitation
 To an informal gathering.
 Just some people getting together after work.

My initial thought was to ignore the invite.

The request was last minute, and I was still working.
 I wasn't sure I wanted to interrupt what I was doing.

In the end, I responded with a tentative 'maybe'.
 I wanted more time to consider my options.
 Maybe bring my wife, Amy, along with me.

Still, I wasn't committed.

I didn't know who would be there.
 Why make the effort,
 to hang around people I don't really like.

So I figured instead of calling Amy,
 And joining her at the location of the gathering,
 I'd give it a little more thought
 And wait till she got home.

Time passed.
 I finished up my work,
 took the dog for a walk.
 When I returned home,
 Amy's car was in the driveway.
 But when I went upstairs to speak to her
 She was lying on the bed taking a nap.

I looked at my watch,
 It was now getting late, too late.
 I had no-one to push me forward.
 So I sent off the message, 'Sorry, next time'.

Later I heard about the gathering:
 About the good people that were there,
 some of the interesting conversations,
 and the fun that was shared.

I regret that I was so indecisive,
 That I opted for what was easiest,
 and missed out on something good.

In today's parable we also hear about an invitation to a gathering.
 An invitation that was ignored and rejected.
 To give us some context,

In the Gospel of Matthew
 Jesus has made his final trip to Jerusalem
 And is only chapters away
 from his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion.

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to a king's welcome
 And when he visited the Temple
 He chased out the crowds of merchants
 Reminding those present

That the Temple was meant to be a house of prayer.

The next day when he returned,
 The chief priests and elders questioned his authority
 (For the disruption).

Jesus refused to respond directly.
 Instead, he told a series of three stories,
 Three parables which together form a triptych
 Of the human response to God's invitation.

"In the first parable... the refusal to respond
 begins with a rejection of John;

in the second it is the historical ministry of Jesus
 which is rejected;

in [today's parable] the invitation that is rejected
 is that of the risen and returning Jesus
 [who is made known]
 through the testimony of Christian witnesses."ⁱ

This isn't all instantly evident to most listeners.
 Jesus tell us this in parables.

Parables aren't straightforward tales.

"In terms of image and subject matter... [they] are realistic,
 but in the unfolding of the parable
 the realism is shattered..."

Ricoeur observes that the parables
 follow a pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

A prime key to the meaning of a parable arises
 when the realism of the parable begins to break down."ⁱⁱ

Just consider today's parable,
 the parable of the wedding banquet.

Just to be clear the children's story
 that I told was based on Luke's version.
 What was read from the Bible was from Matthew.

While both are similar

Matthew has raised the stakes
and is R-Rated for violence.

In Matthew's version the story isn't just a banquet
but a wedding feast.
And it is not just any host who is presiding,
but the king of the land.

The king is holding a wedding banquet for his own son
And sends out invitations in different directions.

So far everything makes sense.
This is something all quite imaginable.

When the invitations go out, some refuse to RSVP.
When a reminder is hand-delivered, some ignore the request
While others violently lash out as the couriers.

This is where it gets really strange.

You might turn down an invitation from a friend,
But no-one turns down an invitation from a King.
As for killing the messengers
This was considered a war-crime,
Even in the violent ancient world.ⁱⁱⁱ

The parable notes that the king responds
To the death of his servants
with his own retribution.

Yet the wedding isn't called off.
And there is still need for a celebration.
Given that this first round of invitations have been rejected
the king now directs his servants
To extend the invitation to everyone,
Both the good and the bad.

Again this is strange and unexpected.

Even those of the highest status among us today
Will not be receiving an invitation
to be present King Charles' coronation.

Attendance at royal events
Is reserved close relations and distinguished guests.

But the King sends his servants to hand out invitations
In malls, bars, and coffeeshops,
to whoever they can find.

In the end the banquet hall is filled.
There is a joyful celebration for the king's son.

But while the king is observing the festivities
He notices someone there, unsuitably attired.

This is again unexpected.

The parable told us that the food had already been prepared
And that the servant were sent
to quickly gather whoever they could find.

Did they expect people to go out
and rent a tuxedo before they arrived?

And yet this man is singled out,
And ejected for not being dressed appropriately.

Jesus tells us that “many are invited, but few are chosen.”

In the end it seems that Jesus’ parable is up to form.
The parable begins with a situation that is easily imaginable,
But whose realism soon breaks down.

So how are we to understand it?

One way into this parable is to understand it as allegory.
The characters and the plot have a reference beyond
What might be first perceived.

For the people of Israel a wedding feast,
A common experience,
was also an image used to describe
the end of the age
when God would consummate all history.

We read from the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.^{iv}

For the people of Israel ‘King’ was a cypher
For the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
In his own ministry, Jesus is spoken of uniquely as God’s ‘son’.

God, Jesus, and the end of the age
are key reference points
for interpreting the rest of the parable.

At the end of the age God will be celebrating Jesus.

God sends his servants which we can understand
 As the first apostle and evangelists
 to invite their friends and neighbors.

Yet despite the source of the invitation,
 Despite the joyous occasion that is presented,
 Many people ignore the opportunity,
 And some even respond with violence.

This leads God to extend the invitation more widely,
 Sending another group of servants
 (this time modern-day missionaries and everyday witnesses)
 To invite those not on the "A" list.

Many of these people respond to the positive,
 But some who show up aren't prepared.

In the New Testament there is lots of language
 About clothing ourselves in Jesus and his virtues.

Listen to these words to the church at Colossae:

Therefore, as God's chosen people,
 holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves
 with compassion, kindness, humility,
 gentleness and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another
 if any of you has a grievance against someone.
 Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And over all these virtues put on love,
 which binds them all together in perfect unity.^v

It seems that such virtues
 Are the requisite wedding clothes.

As one scholar has noted:
 Those who respond to the invitation...
 must have something to bring to the judgement
 other than having said, "Yes, Lord."

They must be properly clothed with the deeds of Christian discipleship.^{vi}

[For those of you who are wary that I might be arguing
 For earning our place at the banquet,
 Consider John Calvin's response to the debate over
 Whether the wedding garment is faith or a holy life.

"This is a useless controversy [he says]
 for faith cannot be separated from good works,
 nor do good works proceed
 from any other source than from faith.^{vii}]

In the end Jesus seems to be speaking words of warning
 to those who might claim to have accepted Jesus' invitation,

but have invested very little in following in his way.

COVID has only accelerated the decline of the Christian church in Canada.
 That time away from Christian community
 Has encourage people to discard this habit
 In favor of other commitments.

Some people believe they can develop Christian virtue
 Outside of intentional Christian community.

And there many reasonable excuses to stay away:
 Life is full, we are busy.
 The church doesn't make it easy.
 There isn't enough programming for kids.

But where else are you going to be instructed
 And encourage in cultivating those virtues
 In piecing together those wedding clothes
 For the end of the age.

Maybe even more important is whether you hear Christ's call
 And accept the King's invitation DAILY.
 It is not a call for a single moment in time,
 Or to come to church once a week,
 But to follow a narrow road,
 A distinct path.

Jesus is looking for these kind of followers.
 [So is our surrounding culture.
 People are sick of Christians who sound religious
 But look nothing like Jesus.]

This requires discipline, dedication, perseverance.

But don't forget that accepting this invitation is also full of promise:
 fellowship and community
 new strength and power...

And a seat at the table at the end of history
 At the wedding feast of God's kingdom.

You are all invited.
 What is your heart response?
 May you follow this up with action
 And demonstrate in your life
 that you too are chosen. Amen.

¹ John R. Donahue, *SI The Gospel in Parable* 94

² John R. Donahue, *SI The Gospel in Parable* 15

³ *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* 1665-1666

⁴ Isaiah 25:6-8 NIV

⁵ Colossians 3:12-14 NIV

⁶ John R. Donahue, *SI The Gospel in Parable* 96

⁷ Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Parable of the Great Banquet - Wikipedia." 7 May. 2022,