

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 28, 2024

An Inviting God

Matthew 22:1-14

This morning, we're still experiencing some of the overflow from the joy of yesterday's wedding for Ashley and Austin. The gladness of the marriage ceremony extended on into the evening as we gathered for the reception. There was plenty of food, drink, music, and even some dancing, to celebrate the beginning of Ashley and Austin's life as husband and wife. I'm sure that for the Strickland and Clodfelter families, this morning is a mixture of joy, exhaustion, and relief.

There's a scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* where the character Alyosha is listening to a priest read the story of Jesus' turning water into wine at a wedding. We get to hear his mental commentary: "I love that passage; it's Cana of Galilee, the first miracle.... Ah, that miracle! Ah, that sweet miracle! It was not men's grief, but their joy Christ visited. He worked His first miracle to help men's gladness ... He who loves men loves their gladness, too."¹

Two weeks ago, I preached about the delight that God experiences when we yield our lives to his sovereign love. God's default posture toward us isn't anger or vindictiveness. His primary way of relating to us is love and mercy. This means that joy is an essential part of who God is, and what he has done for us through Christ opens the way for us to participate in his joy. During that sermon, I quoted pastor John Piper who says, "It is good news that God is gloriously happy. No one would want to spend eternity with an unhappy God. If God is unhappy then the goal of the gospel is not a happy goal, and that means it would be no gospel at all. But, in fact, Jesus invites us to spend eternity with a happy God when he says, 'Enter into the joy of your master' (Matthew 25:23)."²

That statement comes a few chapters after where we are in today's text from Matthew. In our Scripture passage for this morning, God certainly doesn't appear to be a very happy, joyful God. In Jesus' parable, the king who sends out invitations to a royal wedding and gets snubbed by everyone reacts with rage and violence. Now granted, it takes a while to get to that point. Things start out pretty much according to custom. The king begins making preparations for the wedding party and sends out a first invitation, a sort of "Save the date!" notice, as one commentator has put it.³ Then he sends some of his servants out to do in-person follow up, announcing that everything is set and the doors are opening. But everyone basically refuses to come.

The king doesn't give up though. He's so determined to have this wedding party that he sends out a second round of servants with a summons to come join the celebration. This time he even includes more details about the reception menu in order to whet everyone's appetite and stimulate attendance. He wants the invitees to think about what they're missing. But once again, no one is interested. They have other more pressing things to take care of—attending to their property, business relationships, and other kinds of everyday concerns. Then things really get out of hand. Some even resort to violence, mistreating and killing the king's servants. The king then escalates the confrontation by

sending some of his own troops to kill the killers and destroy their city. As far as he is concerned, their refusal of his invitation is a form of rebellion against his reign.

So by this point in the story, the king's banquet hall is all prepared yet empty, large numbers of people are dead, and an entire city has been burned to the ground. And all this over a wedding party? What kind of story is this? What kind of king, and what kind of kingdom, is this, especially since Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like this?

In order to interpret this parable, it's important to note how the whole text begins. Jesus "spoke to them again in parables" (v. 1). Who is "them"? Basically, "them" refers to some of the religious leaders who have been clashing with Jesus over the issue of his authority. This conflict escalates as the story progresses toward Jerusalem and the events of Jesus' trial, suffering, and death. So issues about the rejection of Jesus and his message are in play, as well as issues about the rejection of Jesus' followers, especially by some of their fellow Israelites. In Matthew's own context, this tension between those who recognize the presence of God's messianic kingdom in Jesus, and those who do not, touches the community of disciples that Matthew is trying to address and form. This community of faith probably includes gentiles, non-Jews, who have been responding positively to the kingdom invitation that many of God's own people, especially their leaders, have rejected. The bottom line is that when we understand the historical context of today's parable, it helps us get a better handle on the tone of the story, and the conflicts it reflects.

What's more, the story doesn't end with the smoldering ruins of the city. This king is determined to have this wedding party. So he issues an even more expansive invitation. He tells his servants to go anywhere and everywhere, including the seedy parts of town, and summon people to the banquet. Don't just invite those who are further up the social ladder. Don't just invite those who have a good reputation in the community. Don't just invite those who are sticklers for the religious law and ethically pure. Invite anyone and everyone, the good and the bad, says the king.

The response was amazing. All kinds of people dropped what they were doing and made a beeline for the reception hall. The place was packed with folks, many of whom would never have imagined getting to attend an event like this, in a place like this, eating food like this. And all because the king was relentless about inviting others into something that was incredibly urgent and fundamentally joyful.

In his book *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, Tony Campolo tells about an experience he had late one night in Hawaii. He went into a little "greasy spoon" place and ordered a cup of coffee and a donut. As he sat there at 3:30 in the morning, the door swung open and in marched eight or nine boisterous prostitutes. They sat down near him, carrying on a loud and crude conversation. Being uncomfortable, Campolo was about to make his getaway when he heard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39." One of her friends responded in a nasty tone, as if she were expecting them to give her a party, a cake, and sing to her. "Why do you have to be so mean?" she replied. "I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down?" She had never had a birthday party in her whole life. Why should she have one now?

When he heard that, Campolo made a decision. He waited until they left, and then asked the guy behind the counter, Harry, if those women came here every night. They did. The one with the birthday was named Agnes. So Campolo suggested that he and Harry throw a birthday party for Agnes the next night. "That's great!" said Harry. "I like it! That's a great idea!" He offered to get a cake, and Campolo said he would decorate the place.

At 2:30 the next morning, with everything set, including a big cardboard sign that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!", others started arriving, and by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. At 3:30 the door swung open, in came Agnes and a friend, and everybody yelled, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" She was stunned and flabbergasted. As they finished singing to her, her eyes moistened. When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, she lost it. After the candles were blown out, Agnes hesitated and asked if it were alright if they not eat the cake right away. Instead, she decided to take it home, saying that she lived just down the street. According to Campolo, she carried the cake out the door like it was the Holy Grail. As she left, they all stood there motionless, in stunned silence. Campolo broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Campolo goes on to say:

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all like to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning?

Well, that's the kind of church that Jesus came to create!⁴

That kind of church was, and is, getting gathered and formed by stories like the parable in today's text. A story about a divine banquet celebrating the Son, whose radical hospitality toward sinners is an urgent invitation, a pressing summons that arrives in our lives, not because of our merit but because of his mercy. It reminds me of the invitation Charles Wesley captured in his hymn, "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast":

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
Let every soul be Jesus' guest;
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God hath bidden all mankind.

Sent by my Lord, on you I call;
The invitation is to all;
Come, all the world! Come, sinner, thou!
All things in Christ are ready now.

Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed,
Ye restless wanderers after rest,
Ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,
In Christ a hearty welcome find.

But accepting this invitation, saying yes to the kingdom and entering the heavenly reception hall, doesn't come without cost. The cost is nothing less than your whole life, given over to the reign of God, bearing the fruit of repentance and generating the deeds of faith. Otherwise, we become like the wedding guest at the end of today's text, who accepted the

king's invitation but didn't dress for the occasion. He thought all he needed to do was show up, without wearing garments fitting for this kind of event. His place in the story stands as a word of warning and judgment to any of us who think that just saying yes to Jesus, yes to God's reign, is enough, without truly walking as a disciple of our Lord and doing his will through faithful obedience. At the final judgment, when God sorts things out and sets things right, he will examine you and me to see if our lives have been clothed in the way of Jesus.

His way is the way of God. And according to Jesus' parable, God's way is the way of repeated invitation. God is determined to have this celebration of the Son, this feast of the Savior, and to bring others into the reception hall. And we who profess faith in Christ, who have said yes to Jesus, are God's primary way of sending out the invitation. So we dare not get caught clothed in complacency, content with the way things are. Instead, we're called to be faithful in lives of invitation. Inviting others to Christ. Inviting others to church. Inviting others into the life of God's reign. Inviting others into this community of faith, this celebration of the Son.

Remember that you and I are here at this kingdom banquet because God's invitation reached us, through someone, somehow, someway. God is determined to bring in and include others. As Daniel T. Niles puts it, "Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food. The Christian does not offer out of his bounty. He has no bounty. He is simply a guest at his Master's table and, as evangelist, he calls others too."⁵

¹ Quoted in Mark Galli, "Jesus on the Greatest Party Ever." *The Behemoth* magazine. Issue 13, January 8, 2015. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/behemoth/2015/issue-13/jesus-on-greatest-party-ever.html> (July 24, 2024).

² Quoted in Matt Perman, "God Is Happy." *Desiring God*. June 27, 2007. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-is-happy> (July 11, 2024).

³ Sharon H. Ringe, Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14. *Working Preacher*. October 9, 2011. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-3> (July 24, 2024).

⁴ Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party* (Waco: Word, 1990) n.p.

⁵ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, No. 18.