

Sunday, October 11, 2026
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23A)
Matthew 22.1-14
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Invitation”

So . . . let me get this straight. A king hosts a wedding banquet for his son. The invitations went out months ago. Presumably those invited had RSVPed. And given the fact that it was likely the most extravagant event of the year, there were few, if any, regrets sent. And now that it's time for the big event, nobody shows up? That's pretty rude. No, not rude. Impossible! After all, who would not want to go to a banquet hosted by the king? It's not every day you get to do that. And to add to the lunacy, when the king is told that no one is bothering to come, he goes ballistic and sends his army—an ARMY—to kill the ungrateful invitees and burn their city down. Now that's a little over the top, to say the least. So, then, still wanting to have a party, the king has his servants go out into the streets and bring in anyone and everyone who passes by—both good and bad. After all, you can't let all that food and booze go to waste.

As if the story could not get any crazier, one of the guests—pulled in off the street—is caught attending without a wedding robe. Emily Post would be mortified. After all, protocol dictates that guests wear the proper robes when attending a wedding. This sends the king into a rage and he orders the guest to be thrown “into the outer darkness.” Beginning to think the king has some anger issues.

Now, of course, this is a parable. A story. A manufactured, fictitious account that is meant to convey some deeper theological truth. In this case, this parable is specifically introduced as “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” So, you're saying the kingdom of heaven is a chaotic place with a fickle and capricious king who flies into a rage at the drop of a hat and wreaks destruction wildly disproportionate to the perceived offense? Sure, sign me up.

We Christians generally take Jesus' teachings very seriously. After all, our religion is based on his life and teachings. On his death and resurrection as the ultimate expression of that life and those teachings. Yes, one of Jesus' preferred ways of teaching was through the telling of parables. And admittedly, his parables were frequently playful, to say the least. They were often hyperbolic, containing exaggerated, if not extravagant, elements. This was certainly by design. The people hearing a story that contained wildly overblown details, that contained outlandish circumstances, would have sat up and taken notice of these absurdities. This was meant to grab their attention. To provide them with something they would definitely remember. And because of the absurdity, to be all the more likely to tell the story to others—“You're not gonna believe the story this Jesus guy just told . . .”

We know that about Jesus and about his parables. During the three years of his public ministry, Jesus certainly told some doozies. But admittedly, today's parable is in a class by itself. Today's parable is among the more outlandishly absurd than many others in his repertoire. So, what is Jesus really trying to say in declaring the kingdom of heaven is like a king who needs some serious anger management training?

Obviously, given the absurdity of the scenario presented, this parable should not be taken as a realistic morality tale, but rather as a highly stylized, symbolic story. One that uses bigger-than-life, broad strokes to begin to convey how God operates, and in turn, how we are to respond—to God and God's kingdom. And that all centers around the one element that runs throughout the parable: invitation.

The parable is about a particular group of people being invited to the wedding banquet. The wedding banquet itself being highly symbolic of relationship. A wedding being the establishment of a covenant between two people. A wedding being, in some ways, the ultimate expression of relationship—of deep and profound relationship that is ideally permanent, “until death do us part.” A relationship that is ideally rooted in relationship with God. The banquet itself being a celebration of that relationship. And in its ultimate expression, the banquet being participation in that relationship.

That's all fine and good as far as it goes. But then the parable starts to go off the rails. Guests not showing up for the banquet. The king wreaking destruction in response. While it might be easy to interpret this as God becoming wrathful if we do not respond to God's invitation, that is not what Jesus is implying at all. The initially invited guests, the ones who failed to show up because other things came up, because life got in the way, and the king's over-the-top destruction, is more of an exaggerated caricature of the history of relationship between God and his people. From the beginning, God sought to be in relationship with us. And while we may have initially accepted the invitation, we ultimately failed to follow through on our end of the bargain. We disobeyed God's laws. We turned away from what he would have us do. We were easily distracted by worldly idols. We repeatedly broke our covenant with God. In response, God sent his servants the prophets to invite us back into relationship—back to the banquet. And when we failed to respond, there was destruction. The Assyrian conquest. The Babylonian exile. Did God cause these events? Hard to say. But if God is the God of love we believe him to be, that is hard to imagine. Although, at the very least, God used these tragic circumstances as opportunities to renew his relationship with his people. Or rather, used their interpretation that these were signs of God's anger and the resulting turning back toward God as an opportunity to reestablish and renew relationship.

There is even a bit of a prophetic element in the destruction contained in the parable. With Matthew's Gospel being written following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, many scholars read back into this parable that destruction being a sign of God's judgment that his Chosen People had not been faithful to the covenant, had turned aside from relationship with God, had ultimately failed to show up at the proverbial banquet.

Which leads the parable to the king's decision when the initial invited guests back out—following the retaliatory ugliness—to issue an open invitation in which all were invited, both good and bad. Most certainly an image for the opening up of the Christian community to include not just the originally invited Jews, but Gentiles, as well. The expansion of the invitation that began during Jesus' earthly ministry, and which was further broadened post-resurrection as Jesus' followers spread his message throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. Fulfilling his final commandment: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19).

Which leaves one final, albeit a bit disturbing, part of the parable. The part that contains the real lesson Jesus was seeking to convey:

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.

Why get all upset because a guest wasn’t wearing a wedding robe? After all, the king’s servants had gone out into the streets and brought in all passers-by to fill the banquet hall. No time to go home and change. I don’t know about you, but I don’t carry my wedding robes everywhere I go. Now, it was customary at that time for all guests at a wedding banquet to wear special wedding robes. And some people, if they had the means, owned their own robes that they wore to weddings. But not everyone could. And because, for whatever reason, it was a “thing” to have all the guests wear such robes—likely to create a more festive feel to the event like when we wear formal attire to a special event—particularly the wealthy would have a rack of wedding robes that guests could use if they did not have their own. That is certainly the implication here. Guests were brought in off the streets. The king’s servants would have provided the necessary robes.

Since the man was not wearing a robe, the implication is that he refused. That he was demonstrating arrogance, that he did not think he had to follow social convention. He was going to do things his own way, regardless. Not only defying social convention but, in the process, also disrespecting the king who invited him. Which is the real reason he was summarily removed from the party. Not because he was not wearing a wedding robe per se, but because, in failing to do so—in refusing to do so—he was not respecting his host. He was not fully accepting the invitation and embracing the graciousness of his host. He was not willing to play his part in the drama of the banquet.

In this parable, wearing a wedding robe is a sign of putting aside one’s own arrogance, one’s own wishes and desires, and putting on a metaphorical robe of humility, joy, and thanksgiving. An outward sign of one’s willingness to fully participate in the banquet that was to follow. The willingness to fully enter into and participate in the event as planned and envisioned by the host.

Jesus opened this parable saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared with a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” Ultimately, as we saw, all are invited, “both good and bad.” The invitation to the banquet, entry to the banquet, is not based on merit or anything else we ourselves can do. Rather, entry to the banquet, entry to God’s kingdom, is based solely on God’s grace, on God’s love, which is inclusive and all-embracing. We certainly have a choice in how we respond. We acknowledge that gracious gift and accept the invitation by putting on our robes of humility, joy, and thanksgiving, or we can hold on to our own arrogance and refuse to accept the invitation, to accept the terms established for entry.

God invites us to a great banquet. A celebration of the relationship between God and his people. A celebration in honor of his Son, who is the one who has come to seal that relationship, to signify that relationship in a tangible way, through his life, death, and resurrection. A banquet, a celebration, to which we are all invited, regardless of who we are. All we have to do is accept God's gracious invitation. Come. Let us put on our robe of humility, joy, and thanksgiving, and enter the banquet hall.