

Invitation

[Matthew 22:1-14](#)

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There is a great and popular sermon illustration that I can't resist sharing now. I don't know if it's true, but I hope so. It's said that a long time ago, a preacher was in the pulpit of his church, delivering a classic fire-and-brimstone sermon about Judgment Day. Perhaps the day's text was the one we just heard. "Sinners, change your evil ways," he warned, "or there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth."

An elder woman in the back of the sanctuary stood up in her pew and interrupted him.

"But Mr. Preacher," she said. "I have no teeth."

He looked at her gravely and said, "Madame, teeth will be provided."

*Teeth will be provided.* Don't worry! Even if you wear the wrong clothes to the wedding, like the man in Jesus' parable, you'll be outfitted properly in hell.

This parable is so harsh. It belongs to what many scholars call "the hard sayings of Jesus." These "hard sayings" give everybody trouble, including scholars, because they are so out of sync with his kindler, gentler sayings and the overall arc of his ministry.

What makes this parable, this "hard saying" *extra* hard, in my opinion, is that there is another version of this banquet story in Luke that is much more palatable. It's not exactly the same, but the set-up is very similar. A host is having a great banquet. He invites the usual people, presumably his wealthy, comfortable peers, but they all make excuses and decline his gracious invitation. So then the host sends his slaves out again, saying, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."

And all these people—a virtual parade of human suffering and marginalization, who would never normally get invited to a banquet—they readily accept the

invitation. And there's *still* room, so the host says to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."

The host invites strangers, foreigners, wanderers, literally *anybody* to come in. "For I tell you," he says, "none of those who were invited will taste my dinner." The host means that very *first* round of guests, those privileged people who took the invitation to the banquet for granted—they're at the very end of the line now.

This is familiar territory. "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." These sorts of teachings are at the heart of the Gospel message. It's easy to love this message; it's easy to love this host who gladly welcomes everyone who is present, no matter who they are, worthy or not, presentable or not.

I don't know about you, but I'm less familiar with the Jesus speaking through text we just heard from Matthew. Or, let's put it this way: I'm less of an instant fan of his.

Matthew's version of the banquet parable is, as we heard, filled with this strange and escalating violence. Jesus says at the beginning that the kingdom of God may be compared to king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He makes invitations, but the people will not come. So far, not so different from Luke. The king tries again, but this time the guests "made light of the invitation and went off." This sounds more actively aggressive to me than offering excuses. Then it gets even edgier: some of the invited guests actually kill the king's servants who are delivering the invitation. This is getting scary, no? Not to be outdone, the king retaliates by killing these guests and burning their city. Then the king tells his servants to go out and find new guests, to invite the good and the bad, so the table will be filled.

As if this violent prelude to the banquet were not disturbing enough, then comes the real twist. As the table is being filled with people good and bad, the king notices a guest with no wedding robe on, and he orders that the poor man be bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness, where there will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So what do we do with this seemingly hard-hearted story about the Kingdom of God?

In Confirmation class this past week, Pastor Lauren and I were talking with the students about why context matters so much reading the Bible. When we can start to imagine the world that produced these stories, and identify the questions that they were attempting to answer, and the hopes and fears they sought to address, we can begin to appreciate their power even more.

Consider: I wonder if we have any idea of how explosive the notion of the Kingdom of God was in Jesus' own time.

To follow the way of Jesus, to accept the invitation to the Kingdom of God, meant to live with terrible risk.

In first-century Palestine, it was not safe to challenge the imperial powers. The Romans permitted some Jewish leaders to run the daily affairs of their own people as long as they maintained the status quo of the social order and expedited the collection of taxes.

Jesus' message of the dawning Kingdom of God was a critique of all that: all the symbols, rites, institutions, and social relations that said, "This is the way things are and always will be." His teaching, like the voice of Israel's prophets, was not aimed at converting individuals. It was about the utter transformation of society's self-understanding: religiously, politically, socially.

Remember that: the parable we heard today is not speaking to one person, but to a people, to a system. Jesus wants to revolutionize the system. He's inviting people to join him in a new pattern, a new and different way of being with each other and in the world.

So think about it: if you are going to accept an invitation to enter the Kingdom, to this way of being, *you* must change. You must change your assumptions about who is important, and why; you must change your understanding of what power looks like, and how it is to be wielded; and where the world has insisted, again and again, that there is not enough to go around and resources must be hoarded, you must trust that God will provide for *everyone*.

In other words, a paradigm shift is required of you, in you; it's not optional.

Hence, the need for new wedding clothes to wear to the feast. Remember our man from the parable who didn't bother changing into the special robes and got clobbered for it?

The parable seems to be telling us that, in order to truly enter the Kingdom of God, you must get ready and be intentional about it. This shows that you are indeed taking this Kingdom stuff seriously. To put it another way, in order to be in right relation with God and with our neighbors we need to put on special clothes. Not literally, of course, but spiritually speaking. Putting on the special garment is a metaphor for the kind of radical rearranging of mind and heart that is necessary in order to sit at that Kingdom table.

So the parable is a judgment and a warning against the background of the feast, which is itself an act of grace.

The grace is in the invitation. It's been there from the beginning, and nothing will cause it to go away.

The warning is that *we* will make excuses and decline what has been offered to us, that we will fail to imagine an alternative moral and religious framework for these turbulent days. Perhaps that's what Jesus wants to show us, with this parable. Look, he's saying, look: here's what happens when you make light of God's love for yourself and others, when you mistreat those with less power than you, when you meet violence with violence, when you resist the change that God calls you to make:

It leads to nothing but suffering. *Our* suffering. Cities will burn, and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not because God inflicted this hell upon on us in judgment, but because we have inflicted it on *ourselves* and our neighbors.

To put it another way, to acknowledge the goodness and mercy of God is not sufficient. We also must acknowledge that we owe God an RSVP. I think it's the work of a lifetime to respond, but respond we must, if we are to be true people of faith: with our hearts, with our minds, and with our actions.

We struggle every day, don't we, with this strange faith of ours with all its paradoxes and mysteries and scandalous claims. When we read a hard text like this one, an ugly text, I think it's so tempting to wiggle our way out of it, to stand

up say, “Preacher, I have no teeth,” or offer some other explanation for why these hard words and expectations can’t possibly be relevant to us.

But remember: a parable is a cautionary tale, and if any of us thinks that the twist, the *rub*, does not apply to them, then we’ve missed the point. If we suppose that we can outsmart or tame a parable, then it has lost its capacity to surprise us; or perhaps we have lost our capacity to be surprised.

And it is only by being surprised—and surprisingly changed—that we come closer to the Kingdom of God to which we’ve been so graciously invited.

Amen.