

Invited to...the Kingdom of Heaven

October 11, 2020

Matthew 22:1-14

Meet Bill: He is a hard-working executive who has climbed the ladder of success, one rung at a time and finally reached the pinnacle of his profession! He works 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, and evenings find him holed up with the glow of the computer screen bathing his face in the hours between supper and bedtime. He fears that he has become a stranger to his children but he believes that they understand that his constant working is all an effort to provide the things for them that he didn't have growing up. The invitation comes to him one evening as he is driving home, when his finger hits the wrong button on his car radio and he hears the breathless voice of a radio preacher announcing God's love for him and desire for him to reach out and receive that love. Bill is transported back to Sunday School and the faith of his growing up years and he smiles a bit, but then, quickly changes the station back to his familiar business podcast.

And then there is Stacy. She is 16. You can tell a lot about Stacy by looking at her room. Posters on the wall are inhabited by her current idols. A diary locked in a box under her bed records her latest love. She has been in love six times. The invitation comes to her through her friend Libby, who says one afternoon that her mom is making her go to a church thing and will Stacy come with her. Reluctantly, Stacy agrees. When they get there, there are lots of kids, some whom Stacy recognizes. They sit and listen to a middle aged man talk about how God has a deep longing for young people just like each of those gathered together to invest their lives in helping others. He shows pictures of kids in Haiti and Stacy's heart begins to reach out and then out of the corner of her eye Stacy sees the stuck up cheerleader that ignored her and she decided she sure didn't want to be involved in anything with those kind of people, so she grabbed Libby and said – let's get out of here!

What about Arthur? He is 67 and retired and spends most of his time reading and writing letters to the editor and griping about the state of the world. But his biggest disappointment in life is that his daughter Brenda, who is close to her 30th birthday, has just decided to become a missionary. His daughter! Throwing her life away for the sake of religion and all that nonsense. His invitation comes in the form of a letter that his daughter writes to him, saying, "Dad, let me explain. What incredible joy I am finding as I prepare to serve people whose lives are so impoverished and yet they are able to experience love and share such grace and hope. I have lost my fear of death as I sense the promise and hope of eternal life that flows through God's people. Dad, I know you could use this gift...." And as he reads those words of invitation Arthur is enraged and tears up the letter, muttering, who does she think she is? Trying to tell me what I need?

There are so many ways to say "no" to the invitation to life in the realm of God. There are so many reasons for saying "no" – flipping the channel, walking away, tearing up the invitation. Jesus tells another parable in today's scripture. It is a story about invitations refused. Jesus has been on a roll, recounting the incredible grace of God and the inability of folks to comprehend and embrace it. A grace so offensive that it disqualifies those who refuse to rejoice in its bounty: the unfairness of the overpaid workers, the yes and no brothers, the rejection of the son of the vineyard owner. Today's story is a real doozie! But let us place it in the context of the telling before we seek to hear Jesus' word today.

Jesus is in the last week of his life. He has entered the city of Jerusalem – triumphantly, it would seem. People shout hosanna, wave palms, welcome the King. But the religious authorities are anything BUT welcoming. They are undone by Jesus' version of who God is and how God operates. It clashes with their dearly held notions of God and God's way. And so Jesus tries one last time, with this parable, to paint a picture of God's rule and reign: The kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a King who throws a wedding banquet for his Son...

Ahhhhhh...such a familiar event! A wedding banquet, a time of great rejoicing and celebration. To be invited to the feast would be an honor. Invitations went out. All the right guests were invited and said YES, OF COURSE WE WILL BE THERE!!! But, when the time to party actually came, when the king's messengers

went out to let the invitees know it was time for them to gather in the great banquet hall, they blew them off. All of them. Every last one of them! How absurd, Jesus! That would never REALLY happen, right? Of course not. In Jesus' story, tho, it does happen. And the king, being gracious and understanding, decides not to take it personally and send out another round of messengers with a clear message that NOW IS THE TIME TO COME!!!

Again, the confirmed invitees refused to come! Some had business or personal matters to attend to and just dismissed the messengers of the King, but others took great offense and abused the messengers and even killed them!

Now hold on you say – this would NEVER really have happened, right? But.....in the history of Israel there are countless tales of prophets inviting the people to return to God having not so happy outcomes.....So just maybe Jesus is alluding to the people of Israel – God's chosen ones – who declined God's gracious invitation to live in God's realm. And because of their lousy treatment of the messengers, the king also kills those murderers and destroys their towns. End of that segment of the story.

But there is still an incredible amount of food needing to be eating – tables laden with good things – and so the king sends out yet more messengers to invite people from across the tracks and the other side of town and all kinds of places – the good and the bad – all mixed together are rounded up and brought to the feast! And this is where we wanted the story to just end in our Following Jesus Group. We can handle this: Everyone is invited. Anyone who comes into the celebration of God's love and presence is welcome! The good and the bad! Yeah!

But there's more – it gets worse! The king comes out to look over the collection of folk who are enjoying his celebration and he sees one poor fellow who is not appropriately dressed up for the occasion. Now that is kind of hilarious. All the people were pulled off the street and rounded up and didn't have time to spiff up for the event. Some commentators say that the King would have opened up his royal closets and lined the entry way to the banquet hall for invitees to grab an appropriate garment, and maybe this guy just didn't bother. Others say that it wasn't about the robe – it was about the fact that when the king asked the fellow why he was underdressed, the guy said nothing – made no defense – didn't even acknowledge that he should have or that he did want to but couldn't – you know. And it is the total disregard – the speech-less-ness that did him in.

Still others have suggested that the one who had no wedding robe was actually the Son – well, you know, Jesus himself! And why would the Son have no robe at the wedding? Well, because he gave it to you – of course. The robe of righteousness that rightfully belonged to the Son of God has been flung around the neck of each invited guest. It is the forgiveness and love and grace of a God who is only interested in gathering his beloved into community and having them share the joy of finding their soul at home.

I don't know about you, but I am going to cling to the robe, the righteousness of Jesus that wraps and covers up all the dead end, feeble attempts I have made to dress myself up and become presentable for God. And I am pretty thankful and amazed that even despite all the times I have changed the station and fled the room and torn up the invitation, God's grace calls again. Today. To me. To you. To our world.

As Jesus put it: Everyone is called. All are invited. And some, some of us, come running to accept the invitation again and again – for that is how often we need to respond. Each time we hear it. Each time it is offered. Come to the embrace of the Father. Come be robed in the righteousness of the Son. Come share the joy of the Holy Spirit. For God's sake, Come!