

The 19th Sun after Pentecost, Proper 23

“God’s Open Invitation to Grace”

Ex 32:1-14; Phil 4:1-9; Mt 22:1-14, Ps 106:1-6,19-23

Ok, let’s just say it, “Today’s Gospel seems truly outrageous!” Troops are sent to slay those who behave badly in response to a social invitation. And then, for the failure to wear the expected attire to a wedding celebration, the offending guest is to be consigned to outer darkness?

Further more, all of this abusive behavior is supposed to represent to us the character of God? The question is: “Who would dare to try to serve such a God?”

However, the point Jesus is trying to convey to his adversaries, the Chief Priests and the Pharisees, [and us] is that in the “Kingdom,” God makes the rules; we do not. And, those “rules” are not, as they say: “open to negotiation.” God’s ways are not our ways. If God invites you to a feast, do not make light of it, as did those in Jesus’ parable. God is our maker and judge and is not to be dismissed as being of little consequence.

And if we do accept the invitation, then we are expected to respond appropriately. Or, as in our parable, wear the prescribed attire for a “formal” banquet. In other words come prepared by wearing what is expected or don’t show up at all. Do not insult or disrespect the host by appearing unworthily. For that is merely another way of dismissing God, of asserting that we ourselves are sovereign—and may therefore ignore divine authority.

I know that this all makes sense for some, yet for many others, it just sounds crazy. I’d like to share what I think might be a good contemporary example of the point Jesus makes in this parable.

Let’s say that an invitation to a wedding arrives which reads: “Black tie optional.” Now, in plain English that means: “Gentlemen: Wear a tuxedo, however, if a tuxedo is an economic hardship for you, a dark suit may be substituted.” Now, suppose one of the wedding guests arrives in a rumpled sports coat and equally wrinkled khaki slacks, a polo shirt, and scruffy deck shoes without socks.

It is not a matter of economics for this man, because everyone on the guest list knows he is affluent enough to buy a whole chain of clothing stores if he wishes. Plainly, it is this man’s way of “thumbing his nose” at convention.

Yet, it is even more personal than that. After all, is it not the “host,” rather than the guest, who has the prerogative of “setting the rules” for the occasion? This means that our intentionally

ill-dressed guest not only blatantly ignored convention in general, but also intentionally insulted his host in particular.

Moreover, the host in my little scenario has not “*sent out troops*” to compel attendance. So, if the “invited” guest could not willingly wear at least a suit to a “formal” reception, why not just “stay home?” Or, perhaps was he, in fact, seeking to be the “real” center of attention?

Surely, he knew that his out-of-place attire would draw attention. Surely, he knew that the other guests would murmur about his inappropriate attire rather than focus their attention on the graciousness of the host and the happiness of the newly wedded couple. So, the offender’s problem is not just his disrespectful and inappropriate attire; it is also his own overblown ego.

So, the parable is not really about “inappropriate” attire. It is about our own ego, our own rebellion, our own disobedience, and our lack of gratitude for even receiving God’s grace-filled invitation.

The point is that, this is often the same thing that still impedes serious discipleship in our day. We want to “set the rules,” not follow them. This truth is not easy to hear; but neither was it easily heard in its original setting. Remember, it got Jesus the Death Sentence!

Starting with Adam and Eve, passing on through Cain and his descendants, we humans love to think that we are in charge. We like to think that we are the most important beings in the universe, and therefore, by golly, we can do as we “jolly well please!” [Come to think of it, there may be some analogy to proper social-distancing and “Mask Wearing” in there too!]

The point is that “Rebellion” against divine authority is not a novel invention. Rebellion against God’s sovereignty is our human condition. Our rebellion and disobedience is why Jesus dies in the cause of reconciliation.

When we mortals refuse to submit to God, God humbly submits to us by way of seeking to “win us back” through tough love and costly grace. It’s precisely what St. Paul refers to in his *Letter to the Philippians*. Paul directs us toward an answer to the question of, “If we are so egocentric (and have been so from the beginning of history), how can we escape our rebellion against God?”

Do not all of us need one another as we seek to evade the egoism that makes us suppose that we get to “set the rules?” Do we not need to assure one another that, although God may be rightly offended by our insolence, yet this same God will turn from bringing disaster upon us and will help us to be faithful? Do we not need each other as an occasional reminder to help us to recognize the sheer honor of even “being invited” into God’s Kingdom in the first place? And, do we not need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us to respond to that unearned grace appropriately?

It is this that now enables us to give a meaningful response to the opening question, “Who would want to serve such a God?” I believe the appropriate response is, “Who could refuse to serve such a God? Who could refuse to serve such a God who constantly helps us and saves us from ourselves?”

“Hallelujah! Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.” Ps 106:1

What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today’s readings?

1. Weddings in the biblical world were important social events. Why do you think the “invited” guests from the social elite chose not to attend and even offered what scholars and cultural anthropologists say were exceptionally “flimsy excuses” at best?
2. Jesus says that the originally “invited” guests were *unworthy*. Consider what it might have been to be considered: “Worthy” versus “Unworthy.”
3. When the “unworthy” invited guests failed to appear, the King sent his slaves to round up everyone they could find to attend the celebratory feast: vagrants, passersby, street merchants, beggars, etc. Imagine you were one of those people now invited to attend a massive feast. How would you feel about the your sudden “invitation”?
4. Why do you think one of the no-notice attendees was inappropriately attired?
5. Jesus concludes his parable by saying, “*Many are called, but few are chosen?*”^[v.14] Why are you among the Chosen?
6. How does your life reflect being among “the Chosen” today?

For the Biblical Scholars

- Today’s Gospel passage is a parable. It is often referred to as: The “Parable of the Wedding Banquet.” Jesus says that the originally “invited” guests were *unworthy*. Who do you think Jesus was specifically implying or saying was “unworthy” and would therefore be replaced?
- Today’s Old Testament passage concerns “The Golden Calf.” Why did Aaron have the people’s gold cast in the form of a bull calf? What is significant about the image of a bull?
- The text specifically says that: “*the LORD changed his mind.*”^[EX 32:14] **Why** did God “change his mind” about what God had determined to do?
- What compelling argument did Moses put forth?