

## Uninvited

Matthew 22:1-14

Over the last few months, we've been uninvited to many things. Jamie Pollard originally wanted 25000 fans at the first Iowa State home football game, but had to settle for none, and only 15000 last weekend. Admissions policies and numbers for the winter sports are still being developed, but it sounds like only 1500 fans will be allowed in Hilton Coliseum for basketball games.

As in the parable we hear today, people were uninvited to weddings. As groups of over 10 were discouraged as the pandemic began, many people had to decide what to do with their weddings. Some delayed their weddings until later, hoping for a future time when large gatherings were safe and allowed again. Others went ahead with very small weddings.

In today's parable, though, we have two groups of people who were uninvited from the wedding. The first group is made up of those who had been invited, had accepted the invitation, and then decided to not attend at the last minute. The second group is the guy who makes it into the reception hall, but isn't wearing the right clothes, and gets tossed out.

Placed where it is in the story of Matthew 22, of Jesus teaching in Jerusalem during Holy Week, talking to the chief priests and Pharisees, following the previous parables, it's easy for us to read this parable a bit self-righteously. The guests who reject the invitation are the Pharisees and the chief priests, those who have heard the invitation of God through prophets like Isaiah to join in a wedding feast, in a great celebration. The servants that were sent were all the prophets of the Old Testament sent to invite sinful, stubborn people to a celebration of love

held by the God who chose them. The destruction that comes upon them in the parable is just Jesus predicting the destruction of Jerusalem that will come forty years or so after Jesus tells this parable. The people that respond to the second round of invitations are those of you who, like you and I, are not of Jewish descent, but are from the Gentiles, those who the message of Jesus went to after he was rejected by those who had been set apart to be God's people in the first place. But that isn't all there is to the story. God doesn't stop inviting, and the world is still full of sinful, stubborn people who reject a gracious God's invitation.

And so we look at those who reject the invitation after accepting it, and see how the busyness of the world can get to us. Even before the pandemic, those who work with church metrics were saying to count people as regular attendees if they attended 2 or 3 times a month, because so much fewer people are attending church every week. After a large uptick in livestream church views at the beginning of the pandemic, over one third of church goers had stopped even watching those! We wonder how you could reject an invitation from a king, but people do it all the time.

And that brings us to the man who gets uninvited after making it into the reception in the first place. The one who gets unmasked as an imposter. The wedding reception is fit for a king, or at least a prince, yet is full of people who'd never seen the inside of a castle. They don't know what fork to use, they don't know how to properly appreciate a good glass of wine, and they don't even know the host! They were all back-up guests. And when you're a back-up guest, when you know you weren't

good enough or popular enough to get invited the first time that makes it even harder. Because you know you don't belong. You know that you weren't the first choice, or even the second choice. When you know you only got invited because the hosts had paid for the food already and they didn't want it to go to waste.

The group of back-up guests must have spent a lot of time looking at one another, wondering how they ended up where they were, and wondering when they'd be found out as impostors. Surely someone would discover that they didn't belong!

So when someone is discovered who doesn't belong, someone who's wearing the wrong clothes, you have to imagine that the tone of the feast would change. Instead of rejoicing, there would be fear. One impostor was found out. All of the party guests would have wondered if they would be next. If one back-up guest is rejected, why not all of them?

When I was in college, my friends and I would often suffer from what one of our professors called "impostor syndrome." Even though we'd all gotten into a well-respected university, were part of the honors program, and had strong GPA's, we all kept waiting to be found out as impostors. We waited for someone to figure out that we really weren't smart enough to be doing what we were doing. We kept waiting for someone to figure out that we didn't belong. We kept waiting to find out we were back-up choices, that we only got in because other more qualified students chose to ignore the invitation.

No one who came to the wedding feast was worthy of being there. They were all back-up guests. No one would have had the right clothes, invited as they were from the highways and byways, with little notice to prepare. Those

who you'd think would be worthy rejected the invitation. Those who were there had not only been given the gracious gift of an invitation in the first place, but they were given celebratory wedding clothes so that they could fit in, so that they could enjoy the party without worries. It was a huge gift. What else could they do but rejoice?

We too, have been given the gracious invitation to the great wedding feast, the celebration of God's grace. We, too, come in, wondering if we are worthy, wondering if we'll fit in, wondering if we will get uninvited. And we try so hard to make sure that we can fit in, that we do fit in, that we miss the joy of the celebration. The hardest thing to do is not to give grace, but to receive grace. We'd rather convince ourselves that somehow we receive grace because of some worth in ourselves, because of something that we've done. We want this so strongly that we will even make faith itself a work, something that we do and choose for ourselves. And when we do that, we end up like that unfortunate, ill-dressed wedding guest.

The parable is not about a grumpy king who can't stand what young people are wearing these days, or to make sure that no one's wearing holey jeans or open-toed sandals. It's about our reception of God's gracious gifts. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Clothed in Christ, dressed as sharply as the groom at a wedding, or a prince at a feast. Not because of anything we did, but because of what Christ did for us.

Paul gives us a great list of virtues in today's epistle lesson from Philippians. But in his letter to the Colossians, he doesn't just tell them to

think on these things. He tells them to put them on, as they put on clothes. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12-15).

Put them on. Clothe yourselves with them. Wear them proudly. Put on kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love. Living not in fear of being found out as impostors, but knowing that you have been called, that you have a place at the feast with your name on it, and a brand new set of dress clothes waiting. And may the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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