

Texts: Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Last night Maggie Vinton and Troy Gregory were married, and all of us guests who were present shared in the feast. It wasn't quite as fancy as the photograph on the bulletin cover. No formal table settings. But the ceremony was filled with joy and the tables were set with joy and the food was served with joy and the guests had joy written on their faces. Who would decline an invitation to such a joyful celebration?

Has anyone here ever received an invitation to a state dinner at the White House? I have not. But it is my understanding that an invitation to dine with the President is one invitation that no one can refuse. Etiquette demands that when an invitation comes from a head of state, it is more like a command. To say no is more than an insult. And that is the situation in the parable that Jesus tells us this morning. A king sends out invitations to his son's wedding, and the invited guests, the ones who come from the wealthiest families, the ones who have business to conduct with the king, the ones who are political allies, every single one of them refuses. They even go further than that – they make a joke of the invitation. They even turn to violence, mistreating and killing his slaves, and then the king returns the violence by burning down the city. What kind of wedding celebration is this?

But then the king does something completely new. He sends his servants out to invite anyone they can find to the wedding banquet. What do you think would it be like to be standing on the curb waiting for a glimpse of the royal couple as they ride by? When suddenly a servant taps you on the shoulder and tells you that you are being summoned to come into the royal palace itself? How would you answer? What would you wear?

The Bible is full of feasts and festivals, banquets and dinner parties. When God's people gather around a table, there is usually more than food involved. God also makes a

promise to be present with his people through good times and bad. In Biblical language, this is called a covenant. In three of the readings for today, we find God hosting a banquet. In Isaiah we read a hymn of praise for the Lord God who has done wonderful things, who has been a refuge for the poor and needy, who has defeated ruthless enemies. This God sets a table on the holy mountain of Jerusalem for all peoples. There are tables lined with rich food, pitchers filled with fine wine. It is a feast for all who have been exiled, defeated. God promises in this feast to swallow up death forever, to wipe every tear from the faces of those who have suffered.

In Psalm 23, we learn of a table set for us right in front of our own enemies. We hear those beautiful words of promise, of oil poured out on our heads in blessing, of a cup filled so full that it spills over in abundance. This Psalm is most often read at funerals, yet it also offers celebration for the here and now. It is filled with a joyful sense of trust in God who will provide for us and accompany us through this journey of our lives.

And then Matthew tells us Jesus' parable of the king who sets a banquet table and then invites the riff-raff off the streets to come in and eat when those other guests refused to come. Like all of Jesus' parables, this story turns our expectations upside-down. Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus had just ended his parable right there, with a picture of a wedding hall filled with everyone who, like us, has said "yes" to God's invitation?

It's actually uncomfortable enough to picture ourselves in the banquet hall along with people right off the streets, both good and bad together, as Matthew puts it. Who knows who would be seated next to you? I've seen the discomfort right here in this church when someone has shown up to ask for food in the middle of a committee meeting or birthday coffee or Wednesday quilting.

But there's more. Jesus goes even further. One guest is singled out for not having dressed up for the party. And when he can't give a reason, he is thrown out – and not just to the curb. He gets thrown into the outer darkness, where, as Matthew loves to say, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew's gospel includes difficult parables like this one that speak of judgment and exclusion. Today's gospel reading is the third in a series of parables that Jesus tells that singled out the religious leaders of his day. But not only the religious leaders. The parables were also directed at the community of disciples gathered around him. And -- Jesus' words are directed at us. "Many are called but few are chosen." Put yourself in the place of that guest. What does it mean to be invited by Jesus to the banquet? What does it mean to be offered a seat at the table? What is required?

Most "official" invitations that come these days include some kind of description of the dress code. I recently received an invitation to the Alumni Council dinner at the College, and it says to wear formal or business attire. I think it's a sign of our casual culture that we have to be told what to wear. But are there times when you neglect or refuse to put on the wedding clothes? Maybe you feel unworthy to wear such fine garments. Maybe you feel there is nothing wrong with the way you are 'dressed.' Maybe you just want to wear the 'comfy clothes' of your familiar routines.

We Lutherans are very fond of talking about the free gift of grace that God showers down on us. There is nothing that you have to do to earn that grace, no requirement that you make the first move toward God. There is nothing to achieve, nothing to prove. Christ's life, death and resurrection has freed you from captivity to sin, freed you to live that new life. God wants to honor you with this invitation. But at the same time, there is

an answer to be given. So what are you going to do, now that you don't have to do anything? What will your response be to God's amazing invitation? What are you planning to wear?

Rule # 1 with Jesus: anyone and everyone is invited to the party, and the Lord will take anyone and everyone who shows up. It's not like applying for admission to college, or trying out for the sports team or school play, or interviewing for a job. If the folks who were originally invited decide not to come to the banquet, there are others out there who are hungry. But there is more to living a Gospel life than just showing up. For much of the church's history, when a person was baptized, he or she was wrapped in a white robe, to symbolize their new birth in Christ. Wearing new clothing is a consistent theme in the New Testament. Wearing new clothing means transformation and spiritual change. The invitation to the banquet is free, but once we accept that invitation, there *is* something new to do, something new to wear. To put on a wedding robe is to know the significance of the occasion, to allow God's gracious invitation to change your life.

Think of all the different times you have gathered, with family, with friends, around a table of food. There are big celebrations, like last night's wedding feast for Maggie and Troy, the first in their new life together. There are family and school reunions, picnics, Thanksgiving at grandma's house, fancy restaurants. And there are even the sad times, a cup of coffee in the hospital cafeteria or the funeral lunch at the church. There are small meals and large, lunch in the break room and Sunday brunch. Every meal that we share has a sense of the past, present and future in it. Every meal that we share with others encompasses God's promise to be there with us, in the good times and the bad.

The good news is that God never stops inviting you to the feast of life. God is inviting you to this amazing banquet now, right here at this table of grace. So come and eat and drink with all of God's people, the ones who are sitting beside you here in this sanctuary, the ones who are sitting in churches all over the world today, and the ones who have lived and died and who are now feasting at God's eternal table. Put on your wedding robe, your best suit, your party dress. Come and be changed. Come and receive new life. This invitation is for you.