Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

ENTERING THE STORY

There are three versions of this parable. The Matthew version is the lectionary text above, there is a version found in Luke 14:15-24 and another version in Thomas 64:1-11 (below). Scholars generally agree Jesus told a story like the one found in all three texts. Each parable reflects the particular writer's purpose.

Matthew's version has often been interpreted allegorically to suggest that the king (God) plans a banquet for his son (Jesus). The invitations are given to his subjects (Judeans). They do not accept the invitations, the king destroys their city (Jerusalem), and the invitations are given to others (Gentiles). This interpretation depicts the Christian version of God dealing with the elect. Thomas' version is relatively simple but has exaggerated the commercial basis for rejecting the invitations. Luke's version seems closer to the style and character of Jesus.

Luke 14:15-24: *One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him; 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, Ihave bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, '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 the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.*

Thomas 64:1-12: *Jesus said, A person was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. The slave went to the first and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said, "Some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instructions. Please excuse me from dinner." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master has invited you." That one said to the slave, "I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said to the slave, "My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner." The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." That one said to the slave, "I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me." The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused." The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."*

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Read and compare all three versions in order to get a clearer sense of the parable or perhaps experience the parable with new insight. Take some time to explore the differences and similarities in all three. Make note of what is included and what is omitted:

What do you learn of the host in Matthew?

What do you learn of the host in Luke?

What do you learn of the host in Thomas?

What do you learn of the invited in Matthew's version? Describe the reaction of the invited:

How does the king respond to those invited? What are the reactions of those invited in Luke's version? Make a list of all their excuses:

Consider the four invited ones in Thomas' version. List their excuses:

What do you imagine the king/master/host is intending by inviting guests to dinner and being willing to share his abundance? How might the king/master/host feel when the slave returns to tell him the invited guests are not coming to the dinner he has had prepared? How do you imagine the invited who did not accept the invitation feel? Explore the reactions of the invited in each version.

In Matthew's version:

In Luke's version:

In Thomas' version:

In each version the instructions are given to go out into the streets, lanes, roads to bring back new guests to eat the dinner. What do you imagine are reasons for bringing people from the streets to the dinner? How might the people on the streets respond to the invitation? What do you imagine they think and feel about this invitation to come into the house for dinner?

In what ways has the dinner event changed from the original plans? What do you imagine has happened for the king/master/host as a result of the changes? What of the slave or slaves in each version? What has happened for the one who delivered the invitation?

In all three versions of this parable, what do you hear Jesus saying? What is Jesus' message between the lines? What is being said about God? What is being said about human beings?

2. How is this story happening in the world around you? Who are the ones preparing a dinner and inviting guests? Who are the invited guests who do not accept the invitation? What excuses are you aware of and hear being made? Who are those in the streets, roads, lanes invited to dinner to take the place of the invited?

3. How is this story an event in your life? What is a dinner you have prepared and no one comes? What do you know of the frustration and embarrassment of inviting guests who do not attend your function? What do you know of the ones who were your first choice?

What do you know of excuses you have used to refuse or avoid an invitation? How are your excuses the same as those in the parable? How are they different? What do you know of the street people who do come? How are your street people changed? How are you changed?

What is an invitation coming to you today? How might you respond?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- What is a wedding? What is a wedding banquet? If you have given such a feast, remember the plans, the decisions, the costs and the promises of putting such an occasion together. If you have not, imagine what such a feast would be like. What food would you serve? Who would be invited? What music, what flowers, what gifts or favors would you provide? What would you wear? What oxen and calves would be slaughtered for the event? What anxieties would be part of the planning of such an event? What hopes would you have for it? Picture such a banquet and feel the resulting disappointment when those who were invited did not come. Imagine the tables, with the uninvited seated there together. What might this tell us about the reign of God? About ourselves?

- *Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find*...Most of us don't spend very much time with people who are not like us. At work, at church, in our communities, we tend to stick close together. Spend some time somewhere where there are people you don't ordinarily encounter—at the mall, at a hospital, at City Hall, at a soup kitchen, in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Imagine inviting everyone you find to dinner. What would it take for you to do that? What fears or anxieties might lead you to be cautious? What possibilities might potentially be opened up? What difference does it make to look at strangers as potential guests?

- What do you know, within yourself, of the king in this parable? What do you know of the disappointment and anger of having people you have counted upon ignore or turn down your invitation to your "party"? On such an occasion who did you invite in their stead, opening your "doors" to any and all rather than to them? When the "others" arrived, what did you experience of suddenly becoming particular about who was in your home or life? At that point in the parable, how was the king feeling? How were you feeling? What is going to happen next at the king's party? At yours?

- *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to*...Let's skip to the part of this comparison in which the king asks the man how he got in without a wedding garment. How was it that this man, of all those "good and bad" people the slaves had gathered in, was the only one accosted for not having a wedding robe? Why may the man have been struck speechless when the king accosted him? What thoughts and feelings may have run through his head and gut? What feelings and thoughts are rising in the king? How have we, rightfully or wrongfully, been in the same spot as the man brought in from the street? Where within us is the one who, despite disappointment, demands that things yet be done correctly? Where is the one who is unable to meet the demands? How can these two, living together in our world or within ourselves, be like the kingdom of heaven? How would you describe a kingdom that promises the banquet but requires participants in the banquet to behave in a certain way, no matter what their circumstances? With what feelings do you look to a kingdom of heaven that might throw you out as the king threw out this unfortunate guest?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan

The Great Supper. There are three versions of this parable. The synoptic tradition is represented by Matthew 22:1-10 and Luke 14:16-24, and there is also a version in Gos. [of] Thom. 64.

(a) The Synoptic Tradition. It is difficult to decide for sure whether Matthew and Luke both found this parable in Q or whether it belongs to their special and independent sources. The main difficulty is that Matthew's version has been considerably changed as compared with Luke's. He has made two major additions. First, he has added on at the end the originally independent parable of the Wedding Garment in 22:11-13 and then made some minor adjustments within the Great Supper in preparation for this appendix. One realizes immediately that this inclusion breaks the logical unity of the parable. The host has just gathered guests off the streets without any warning in 22:9-10 and yet he now expects instant wedding garments and sartorial elegance in 22:11-13.

Second, Matthew has deliberately inserted allusions to the immediately preceding parable of the Wicked Husbandmen from 21:33-46 into the parable of the Great Supper. In this former parable, which will be seen in great detail in the next chapter, the evil tenants killed the owner's servants and even his son so that the owner came and "put those wretches to a miserable death" in 21:41. In the parable of the Great Supper, Matthew drew a parallel to this. The invited guests "seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." It is obvious that 22:6-7, just cited, could not have been part of the original parable: why such violence in declining a dinner invitation, and are we really to imagine the sending of a punitive expedition while the dinner grows cold on the table? Matthew's purpose is clear in all this. He has allegorized the parable into an image of the history of salvation, as he sees it, and by his addition of 22:11-13 he has actualized it in application to the internal tension within the Matthean community. Those originally invited did not come (Israel) and so others (the Gentiles) were brought in to the banquet, but they must still be worthy of this invitation (problem people in Matthew's community). In other words, Matthew combined and collated three independent parables, the Wicked Husbandmen, the Great Supper, and the Wedding Garment into what R.J. Dillon called "the parables of the true Israel," a diptych allegorization of salvation history.

From *Son of Man* by Andrew Harvey

In his daily practice, Jesus rebelled calmly against the deepest rules of his world. He lived his own parable of the Banquet and the injunctions of the master in it: "Go therefore to the thoroughfare and invite to the marriage feast as many as you can find." In the parable, the master's servants "went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found," both bad and good, so the wedding hall was filled with guests. In his daily life, Jesus made a point of sitting down with every kind of person, even outcasts. Jesus' table had the freedom from man-made rules and concepts and differentiations of the Kingdom itself. Just as the table of the Pharisees was a mirror in miniature of the hierarchical world they lived in and strove to keep alive, so Jesus' table—where outcasts ate with unmarried women and tax collectors and apostles all together with Jesus himself—was a mirror of the all-embracing mercy and compassion of the Kingdom, a mirror, in fact, of the supreme feast and Sacred Marriage of matter and spirit, heart and body, heaven and earth to which God was always summoning the whole of humanity.

From *Take This Bread* by Sarah Miles

We unloaded the pallets, set up a ring of tables right around the altar, and turned the rotunda into a big, messy farmers' market, with piles of vegetables and stacks of bread spilling under the icons and next to the silver

crosses. From two until five, we gave out groceries. Most weeks, each visitor could walk out with five pounds of potatoes, some onions, a bag of oranges, pears, grapes, squash, tofu, lettuce, rice, beans, a box of cereal, a box of cookies, two loaves of bread, and some pasta. Often there were extras: milk or cottage cheese; bagels still warm from a wholesaler; even, once, an eight-foot tower of boxed trumpet mushrooms, fragrant and wild-smelling.

We set up a table outside, to greet people and check them in, entering their names in a big book. "There's always this look," said Susan Kellerman, one of our volunteers, "when I tell newcomers they don't need ID, I just want to know their name." She'd hand each person a number, in random order, and a snack; another volunteer would call out numbers, and, ten at a time, people would come in to pick out their food. We lit candles and put an icon at the door, serving everyone who came without exception, just as we did during the Eucharist.

It was a different set of "everyone" than I saw at church on Sundays. The first week, we had thirty-five; the next, fifty; and within three months, we had close to two hundred people walk through our doors each time we held the pantry. [...]

A long line would form on Fridays in front of the church, beginning hours before we opened. [...] Here was the city I lived in, at last. The pantry wasn't hushed and pious; it was loud and holy. As the whores and cripples, widows and foreigners and thieves and little children gathered outside, it took on an almost biblical atmosphere.

There were a lot of extended Latino families, with fussed-over chubby babies wrapped in pink acrylic blankets. There were black grandmothers from the projects nearby and a beautiful deaf woman with her three kids. There were homeless crackheads and street kids and a couple of schizophrenics; a bunch of old Moldavian ladies in head scarves; Russians with gold teeth; chain-smoking Chinese men in jackets. There was a hyper, skinny black man who danced compulsively to the music on his headphones, whirling around on the sidewalk, shouting out "Love ya! Love ya!" over and over. There was a very sick prostitute and her faithful friend, who'd sit on the steps sharing cigarettes. There was Phil, the speed freak; and Michael, the big scruffy British guy; and Nirmala, the radiantly calm Chilean woman—all three of whom would later become volunteers themselves. Nirmala chatted easily with me. She lived serenely in a single-room-occupancy hotel, over a bar, on disability. "I'm not happy," she told me, "but I'm content. Content is deep."