

You're invited!

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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Once more Jesus spoke to the people 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." Matthew 22:1-14

I once saw a wedding invitation with four possible responses on the RSVP card:

Box 1: WILL ENTHUSIASTICALLY ATTEND,

Box 2: REGRETFULLY DECLINE.

Then came two more provocative options:

Box 3: WILL REGRETFULLY ATTEND,

Box 4: ENTHUSIASTICALLY DECLINE.

Some of us have been invited to enough weddings over the years that we know all about *regretfully attending* or even *enthusiastically declining*. Invitations can evoke strong reactions, and even in our time of deteriorating etiquette, most of us still place wedding RSVPs in a special category.

This was also apparently true in the time and culture of Jesus, judging from today's gospel text. Here, Jesus builds a whole story around a wedding feast, and invitations to it, and responses to the invitations. To up the ante, this is a Royal Wedding: "...a king ... gave a wedding banquet for his son." And Jesus introduces the story as a parable, one he tells to explore our assumptions and questions and hopes about the kingdom of heaven.

One premise of the story seems to be that God's guest list may include surprises. Implicitly, one of the surprises may be that you or I are on the guest list. We Christians know in principle that we have been and are invited to the present and future kingdom of heaven. Harder to see can be our personal invitations to particular actions and words, invitations often tucked into particular relationships and circumstances, and in response to particular needs and opportunities, at particular times, in particular places.

These real-life invitations were once explored by a Chicago-area life coach in an essay that began with a picture of a scraggly stray dog. Below, in large letters, a question: “*Is it yours?*”

“*This is a great question to keep in mind,*” writes Susan Loraine Barker. “*Sometimes it is most definitely yours. And sometimes it isn’t. What I am talking about is what shows up for you, how you feel about it and how to know if it is yours or not. When it is yours, something has caught your attention and engaged your feelings.*”

What might be yours or mine may not look like an invitation to a royal wedding. It can look more like bad news and hard work and a scraggly lost dog. It might look like choosing to persevere in hope and generosity and caring even after seven months of pandemic lockdown. Or admitting you were or are wrong about some past decision or conviction that caused so much damage. Or making the first move to repair the long-broken relationship. Or maybe finally letting go of that one. Or getting up and dancing when everyone else is so depressed and inert. “*Is it yours?*” Is it *your* invitation to take part in the kingdom of heaven?

You may imagine that I am confusing a royal invitation or a lost dog poster with the classic belief that God calls people of faith to *be* people of faith. But notice that a call from God and an invitation have in common our human freedom to say yes or no. *I’ll show up*, or *I won’t*. *It’s mine*, or, *No way, never*.

With regard to our yes or no to the divine invitation and our human freedom, we may prefer to ignore or exclude ourselves from the more bizarre and catastrophic features of today’s passage. The drama includes two instances of mass murders, a city burned to the ground, and a guest who is invited to the wedding feast at the last moment and then damned to hell for not being properly dressed.

I can only imagine, as priest and pastor, what the premarital counseling was like.

Many Bible scholars argue that the extreme and violent features here are elaborations, either added by Jesus himself or by others at a later date. In this view, these elements provide a commentary on the dynamics and interactions in the four-way relationships between (1) God and (2) the historic people of Israel and (3) the first believers in Christ, all of whom were Jewish, and (4) the later Gentile converts, whose immigration into the Jesus-believing community raised questions of their legitimacy.

Examining all of the related features and theories would be time consuming, And, in doing so, we might miss the invitation, amidst these difficult features of the story, to examine our own dark and destructive potentials. Avoiding what’s ours in God can lead us humans, on occasion, to desperate and tragic measures. Lurking alongside our usual uplifting personal narratives, some of us also have been party to troubling episodes of our own botched invitations with their troublesome and haunting outcomes.

More likely, though, when it comes to invitations from God – invitations to genuinely take part in the kingdom of heaven – most of us, most of the time, are more like some of those who initially received the invitation. All of those first invited miscalculated the time frame for a response to the king’s personal invitation. Maybe they mistakenly thought they had all the time in the world. How much time, I wonder, do you or I have to respond?

Later, some of those invited trivialized the invitation, maybe not unlike how we may trivialize religion and God. Others believed they had more important things to do, at least for now, just as we often do.

Let me suggest in closing, if I may, a few take-home questions, and let me begin with, *what's yours?* What is your invitation from God right now?

If you know *what's yours*, your divine invitation, what box will you check in response?

- WILL ENTHUSIASTICALLY ATTEND,
- REGRETFULLY DECLINE.
- WILL REGRETFULLY ATTEND,
- ENTHUSIASTICALLY DECLINE.

Why are you regretful or enthusiastic?

How are you declining or accepting your invitation?

Amen.