

Sermon: Sunday, October 15, 2023. Matthew 22: 1-14
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Who's in, and who's out? It's a question we ask ourselves all the time.

Jesus told a parable, still relatable today, of a guest list for a royal wedding banquet. It's a great choice of metaphors, because you can't arrange a banquet without making choices between this person and that person, or these people and those people. So who gets invited? Your closest relatives? Your best friends? Your closest allies? Those whom you must invite because of social convention or power dynamics? People you don't know all that well, in order to be hospitable and friendly? The illustration Jesus uses here is a strong one that makes us think.

The thing about it, though, as Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan outlines (cf. pp. 4-36 of *In Parables*) is that when Jesus tells a parable it's *not just* a metaphor, or allegory, or illustration. A parable is specific type of story which invites us to the inner workings of the Kingdom or "Kin-dom" of God. A parable, unlike just any-old-story, challenges us to do a gut check about God's new way of being where the first shall be made last and the last shall be made first.

So what about this parable, of the guest list for this royal banquet?

To help us get inside this parable, I'd like to use our imaginations, to take the viewpoint of each of the groups of characters in it. This is a great approach to just about any Bible story that has a lot of action to it, and I think it resembles the way that Jesus engaged his listeners to really get inside his teachings.

The first group I'd like to look at, is the group that gets asked first. If your relationship to this parable is like mine, you may already have a song playing in your head, the Medical Mission Sisters' song from the 1960s, "I cannot come." Its memorable chorus states, "I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now. I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come." Of course, the ten-year-old version of me remembers it as, "I have bought me a wife, I have married a cow" but still, the point remains: the preferred guests weren't being unreasonable, but their priorities needed some straightening out.

What happens if I imagine myself in this position? The King – or let's go ahead and say what Jesus means here – God - sends word that I am invited to a banquet being thrown by God for his son, the bridegroom. What an honour to be asked, to be on that first list of people, understood to be in a close relationship with God. And yet... I may, like that first group of invitees, find myself too busy with life to say yes to this invitation. Especially in the weirdness of these past three years it is so easy to put "staying on-task" (and on budget) as my number one priority, rather than allowing God's delightful and consequential interruptions to call me in a different direction. In the midst of relentless busy-ness, God's gracious call may just sound like "one more thing" in a life that already has a few too many things going on... and the answer is a sad and weary no.

What about the next group? - the surprised group, the one that would never have expected to be invited to the palace, let alone to a feast.

This second group is a funny one to get inside. In one way, there is joy here, because the invitation was completely unexpected. In another way, though, entering into that space might be painful, touching on some negative self-image or destructive messages that you've been given throughout your life. Within this second group, the reason why God's call specifically to

you is surprising, may be that you don't picture yourself as particularly religious or perhaps even a very worthy person, and then here comes this invitation to come close to God, and sit down at a dining table with all the others who were equally surprised at God's reach-out to them. I get how hard that can be.

Yet having said that, I invite you to imagine being in this group and opening yourself to its joy, because for this group, it's all gift. God reaches beyond the too-busy and the self-important and finds instead the open-hearted. God delights in you, child of God, and the banquet hall starts filling. And because you are surrounded by others who also expected nothing, you're in a community of humble praise: connecting with one another, knowing that the one thing in common around this table is God. Coming to the banquet as part of this group might be surprising or unsettling, but what an extraordinary gift it is.

A third group of characters in this parable is the servants, sent out to spread the invitation to the original list of invitees, and then to go out again and spread the word on the highways and the hedgerows to anyone and everyone willing to say yes to the invitation.

So, in that role of servants, hear this: there are times when God just plain needs workers. And friends, I cannot think of a time in my lifetime when God has more needed the yes of our hearts, the yes of our hands and feet, our willingness to both say yes to the invitation and to deliver the invitation to others. Part of my life as a Christian is to hear God's gracious invitation to the banquet, and another part of my life as a Christian is to make sure that others know that this invitation is for them, too.

Before moving on to the final character in the story, a word about the way the servants are treated in this parable. In this Bible story there is an unsettling amount of violence – mistreatment, death, retribution – that needs addressing. Some of the violence is just a story device, underlining the imperative of Christ's call to a new way of being; but more than that, the violence in the story reflects reality.

In the days of the early Church, some 2000 years ago, being a Christian was dangerous - many died for their beliefs – and even today, being a Christian is a dangerous thing in many lands, as evidenced by our refugee family in Nepal who were expelled from their homeland several years ago because of their beliefs. And over the centuries the parable has often been interpreted to understand “the Jews” are unfairly and perpetually painted as the first group who declined the invitation, and those who came to Christ from other channels as the second group. The violence in the story, then, reflects a world where people were and are killed for religious reasons – far too much in evidence right now, in the long-standing power imbalance between Israel and Palestine, and horrors in and around Gaza as civilian lives are ended so easily. To be honest, the parable itself would in many ways be a better story without the violence – it doesn't need it in order to move forward – but the senseless brutality in these words does open us to a difficult, shameful part of the human condition.

With that being said, the fourth and final character in this parable, is one I hesitate to even name but I will anyway: the one organizing the banquet – the Master, the Monarch, God and perhaps we could include a character mentioned but not featured – the bridegroom, or Christ. The invitation is to a banquet both heavenly and earthly.

Picturing ourselves as God in any story is a slippery slope, leading to all kinds of self-important and often catastrophic actions, but John Dominic Crossan gives a good summary (*In Parables*, p. 73) of how this story might look from a Divine perspective: A host “decides a sudden dinner that very day and sends out his servants to his friends as the dinner is being

prepared. Because of the lack of warning each one finds s/he has a perfectly reasonable excuse. But the result is a meal prepared and a table empty. The host's reaction is to send the servants out to get anyone they can. There is no implication that the host is looking for riffraff. But one can appreciate the host's anger, probably as much with himself as with their friends. Can you imagine, asks Jesus, a situation in which all the invited guests are absent from a banquet and all the uninvited ones are present? This is fundamentally amoral and invites the hearers to recognise a situation of total reversal: the invited are absent, the uninvited are present. As parable it provokes their response to the Kingdom's arrival as radical and absolute reversal of their closed human situation." The powerful say no, the powerless say yes. That is the way of things in God's new realm of equity and justice. From God's viewpoint, the way things turned out is the way things will turn out: those too busy and perhaps too self-assured do not see the need for God and will miss out, while those generally regarded as outsiders are well aware of how much they need God recognize the new life that God is offering, and say yes, and bring their best to God.

So, there's the characters. Naming these different viewpoints has, I hope, been helpful in getting inside this parable... but there's one more thing I need to say.

Although I've invited you to imagine this parable from the viewpoint of these groups, one by one, the truth of the matter is that at different times in our lives we play different roles; at any given moment in our lives we might be playing *all* of the roles. None of us is only one thing; none of us is all insider, all outsider, all servant; none of us is only the one inviting, or the one responding. As humans we are much more complex than that. My hope, then, as a take-away this morning, is that you will feel both the challenge of saying YES to God when it's easier to say NO, and that you will experience the refreshment of spirit that comes when you are pretty sure that God hadn't even notice you, and then realize that you are noticed, you are a beloved Child of God. My hope is that you will know that you are loved without having to do anything to be worthy of that love, and at the same time will feel the calling to be a person whose life of love spreads Christ's welcoming love, opening the doors of your heart, and literally and figuratively opening the doors of this faith community to a world with huge divisions and enormous need. In all the actions and emotions of this parable, may God find ways to speak to you, with whatever it is your heart needs to hear, and may you respond with joy. Amen.

References cited:

Crossan, John Dominic. *In Parables*. NYC: Harper & Row, 1973.

Medical Mission Sisters/Sister Miriam Therese Winter, "I Cannot Come." © 1965.

- Lyrics <http://www.christianstudy.com/data/hymns/text/e0010.html>
- Video with Lyrics https://youtu.be/tW_vdsU_Bb8

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