

22nd Sunday After Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 23A)

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Old Testament: Isaiah 25:6-9

Epistle: Philippians 4:4-13

Title: Jesus' Stories: The Bum's Banquet

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Jesus likes to tell stories. Two weeks ago it was the man with two sons- one whose no turned to a yes, and the other whose yes turns to no. Last week it was the landlord and the deadbeat tenants. This week it is the bum's banquet. This story is the third and final one in the series. In truth, they are the same story, but more on that later. Each story gets a little longer and each has a few more twists and turns.

This story begins with a king whose son is getting married. Dad wants to throw a party for His Son, a royal banquet, and so He plans an amazing reception- beef, wine, fresh fruits, only the best.

Since we got married a few months ago, my wife and I know a little something about planning a wedding reception. There are lots of arrangements that have to made- from finding a hall, to planning the menu, and the decorations and the music.

One of the most difficult parts of the whole process is the invitations. Now I'm not talking about the wording of the invitations, and I'm not talking about the design of the invitation. The hard part, of course, is decided whom to invite- the guest list.

All of the other details will depend on the guests. You want a reception that your guests will enjoy. You need a hall that will be big enough to accommodate everyone. You need a menu that will appeal to everyone's tastes. You need music that people like and will want to dance to.

So you sit down together with your fiancée, and probably your parents, too, and start working on the guest list. There's the wedding party- they will be there, of course. Then there's all your immediately family, and probably a whole bunch of aunts and uncles and cousins that should probably go on the list as well. You can't leave your friends out, either. There are friends you grew up, and your college friends and roommates. You might have a few coworkers that you want to join in the party, too.

You don't want to leave anyone out, but you can't invite everyone. And you have to guess who will be able to make it, especially the folks from out of town. And you need to know who might be bringing a guest, who might be bringing kids. My wife and I even joined a website with a "guest list manager" to try to keep up with everyone.

Once the guest list is set, though, you're still not done. You have to wait for RSVPs to come back. If people don't respond right away, then you need to follow up with them to see if they're coming. And there are always last minute changes. Something comes up and all of a sudden people can't come, or plans change and they will be coming, which of course throws off the seating chart, the final count for the caterer, and everything's a big mess.

If you've ever planned a wedding reception or any other party or get together, you know what this is like, what a big job it is, and how frustrating it can be. You want to have the special people in your life there, but it would be so much easier if you knew who was going to show up.

The king in Jesus' story shares this frustration as well. But he has it even worse. When it's time for the party, no one is there. The banquet hall is completely empty. The meat is getting cold, the ice is melting, the potato salad is starting to turn, and no one is there.

So he sends out his servants to remind everyone of his invitation. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they had the wrong date or the wrong time. No, the reason they aren't there is because they don't want to come. They don't even give excuses. One goes home, one goes back to work. What's even worse is that they assault the messengers (you may remember this from last week). Who ever heard of killing someone who's just delivering an invitation? The disrespect of ignoring the king is one thing, but to kill his servants is simply evil.

The problem with the tenants last week was that they weren't content being tenants. They didn't want to pay rent. They wanted to run the farm. They wanted to be in charge. They wanted to run the show. The problem with the guests who are invited to the banquet this week is that they didn't want to be guests. They didn't want to come to someone else's house and eat their food and listen their music. They would rather be at home, they would rather be at their business than be a guest in someone else's home.

When you're a guest, you're not in charge. You come when you're invited. You eat what's put in front of you. You receive everything from your host as a gift. When you receive an invitation- you don't call up the host and say, "Okay, I know your party is at 7:00, but I'm coming at 6:00 because that suits me better. I'm in the mood for Italian tonight, veal parmesan is one of my favorites, and of course we'll be having chocolate cake for desert. I'm bringing pictures from my latest vacation to look at after dinner, and then we might play some cards if I feel like it." That's just not proper etiquette. That's not the way we act when one of our friends invites us. If we accept the invitation, we know that we'll be dining on our host's terms, not our own.

This was the problem with the man in the end of the story, the one who tried to sneak in without the wedding garments. There is a dress code for this reception. It's a black tie affair. Now the host provides the garments for free, he will pay for your tux, but if you ignore the dress code, if you act like you're in charge and try to do things your own way, then there's not a place for you at the banquet.

Now the host is in charge, but a good host considers the needs and preferences of all the guests. He chooses a day and a time when everyone can come. He selects a menu that everyone will

enjoy with plenty of choices. He finds entertainment that will appeal to His guests as well. He spares no expense in taking care of His guests. It just goes with being the host.

As you can see, the Lord is the host and we are His guests. He has given us His gracious invitation. He had his servants search us out and find us. And there's no one left out. He sends His servants out to the street corners, to the back-alleys, canvassing the neighborhood looking for guests. Our Lord wants to pack His banquet hall full of guests. There's no cover charge, and you don't even have to bring a wedding gift. Everything is provided, even down to the clothes that you wear.

And the wedding garments are the finest around. In your baptism you have been clothed with Christ. You now wear Jesus and His righteousness. Your garments were filthy, but they've been washed clean with the blood of the lamb. You are now arrayed in dazzling white garments, more beautiful than the fanciest wedding dress you could imagine.

You are a guest here in the Lord's house today. You've received the invitation, and you've come to the banquet. Whether this is your first time here or whether you've been coming here for forty years, you are always a special guest. And that's a good thing because the Lord is a gracious host. He's planned a special party with you in mind. The Lord has better things planned for you than you could ever imagine.

The guests are your fellow family members, brothers and sisters in Christ. They are all here with you now, even those who have gone before you. They are with Christ, and Christ is here, so they are here, too. The whole family is here, no one missing.

The Lord invites you here to feed you with His word and with His body and blood. There is no finer menu in all the world than the Lord's Supper. It strengthens you in body and in soul to life everlasting.

And for the music, we join our voices with the heavenly choirs of saints and angels. It may not sound like much, but if you listen with the ears of faith, you can hear them singing along, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, heaven and earth are full of your glory."

The Lord's guests, the Lord's menu, the Lord's music- it's all the Lord's doing. It's his banquet, and that's a good thing. If we were in charge, we could never imagine, let alone pull off a celebration anything like this.

And this banquet is only a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. It would be wonderful if we could stay here forever, but the Lord calls out to leave this place, to go out in the world and keep inviting more bums like us in to the banquet. But one day we will be called home to the banquet that never ends, the mother of all parties, the wedding feast of the Lamb.

All those who want to run things their own way, who want to be hosts rather than guests, will be left outside, but those who receive the invitation and come will be transformed from bums into brothers and sisters of the Lord, the honored guests at His banquet.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.

In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."