

Matthew 22:1-14 – The Feast is for You!

Weddings were quite different in Jesus' day than today – especially royal ones. They were not just a one-day affair but could last a whole week. The focus was not on the bride, but the groom. You didn't bring gifts, and you didn't have to buy special clothes – they were provided for you. To be invited to such an occasion was quite an honor and not something to be taken lightly.

The parable of Jesus we heard today should perhaps be updated a bit so that we who hear it today might properly understand it and the shock value it would have had for those who heard it back then. So allow me to do that for you.

A king bought a new cruise ship for his son's wedding feast. It was the top of the line, had all the latest technology, and was specially decked out for this occasion. And he wanted it filled. No small celebration would this be, but an entire ship full of joy! But even so, the king's joy would be even more, so pleased and happy he was for his son. He was excited just thinking about it and planning it.

So as the preparations were being made, he sent out the invitations. And if you're a king, you don't send them out by mail with a little envelope to RSVP, you send your royal servants to give a personal invitation. And he invited everyone who was anyone. All the A-listers would be there for ten days and nine nights of all expenses paid, no holds-barred, celebration. And no gifts, please. What could you bring for such a king anyway? And don't pack anything – everything is provided. The ship is stocked with everything that is needed so that when you board, you change into your new cruise wear and just begin to celebrate. No worries, no needs, no cell phones, no computers, no distractions – just come, feast, celebrate, and rejoice.

That's a pretty sweet deal, wouldn't you say?

So the day comes, all is ready, and the king sends his private jets out all over the world to pick up the guests and bring them to the ship. You see, your travel, too, is included; there is simply no expense for you to come. But when the jets return to the royal airfield, they come back empty! Those invited do not, will not, come! Why? Well, the reports are, quite frankly, unbelievable. One said he had to mow his grass. Another had to go to work and balance the books. One had a tee time. There was the one who didn't want to miss the next episode of *Dancing with the Stars*. Another had to take his dog to the dog groomer. And then there were the ones who didn't give an excuse – they answered with violence! Seizing the servants, mistreating them, and even killing some.

Stunned would not even begin to describe the king. He was stunned-times-a-thousand! Of course, he got justice for those who mistreated and killed his servants – that was the easy part. Issue the order, and it's done. But there was still the matter of the cruise, the celebration. As stunned as he was, he was still full of joy for his son and had to share that joy. So he sends his servants to go round up people to celebrate with him. I don't care who it is, he says. If they're breathing and they can eat and drink, bring 'em! So they did. Both folks the world would consider good and upstanding people, and those the world would consider, well, less than desirable. The king didn't care! He just wanted to give.

So the hard-working deck hands came on, along with the guy who had been living under the bridge. The teacher followed by some ladies-of-the-evening. Some old, retired folks came next, followed by the guy who stands in the middle of the street every day with a cardboard sign asking for money. The carpenter, the guy who makes shoes, the landscaper, and one servant even brought all the folks from the local homeless shelter. You name it, they all came. They couldn't believe their good fortune. They rushed to their state rooms, showered and changed into the new cruise wear that awaited them, and joyfully threw whatever they wore onto the ship overboard. And the ship cast off and the party started.

And the king was overjoyed. It was a dream come true for him. The ship was filled with joy, but his the greatest of all.

But as he was rejoicing, he passed by one fellow who wasn't wearing his cruise wear. In fact, he kind of stunk. He was wearing his old work clothes and had somehow slipped past the secret service. Well, that didn't make sense so the king asked him: Buddy, what's up? How did you get on and why aren't you wearing your new duds? The king wasn't mad, curious why this man wouldn't receive his gifts and generosity. A simple "I'm sorry" and a quick dash off to change would have fixed everything.

But the man wouldn't even give him an answer. He just gave him one of those looks, like: What? Aren't I good enough for you? My clothes not good enough for your royal highness? You got a problem with me?

And once again, stunned isn't a strong enough word to describe the king, who just wanted to give and give and give and celebrate. So the man was removed. This ship is only for those who rejoice and receive the free and gracious gifts and generosity of the king.

That, my friends, is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says.

And told in this somewhat-more-modern-way, several things, I think, stand out.

First is the incredible, unbelievable, graciousness and generosity of the King, of our heavenly Father.

Second is the stunning rejection of His gifts, and so the winners wind up as losers.

But this cannot stop the King from giving, and so He keeps sending out invitations, simply so that He can give. All He wants to do is give, give gifts, give joy. Losers wind up as winners.

And the ship is big enough for all – like we heard from the prophet Isaiah five times in those verses. This is a feast for all people. There is room for everyone, for the King wants to give to everyone.

And then there is the one who wanted to come on his own terms, the way he wanted. Like he was good enough. Like he deserved it. Like he was doing the King a favor by being there.

The Kingdom of heaven is like a King who wants to give to you. A King who loves to give. He created this world and gave it to you. He gave you your life. And He wants to give you the joy of celebrating in His kingdom forever. That as St. Paul said: You rejoice in the Lord, always.

And He has no ulterior motives. He doesn't give just to get something out of you, to secretly obligate you. Perhaps that is what those who don't come think – that God wants something, demands something, and we've got enough to do and worry about already. But really, what could you give Him that He needs? Puny, needy, little you, giving to the King who not only has everything but gave you everything you think is yours?! No, He just wants you. Wants you there, with Him, in His joy, forever.

And so for that, He gave something else too. His Son. And the Son, the Bridegroom, Jesus, gave His life for His Bride – you – at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, when laden with your sin and uncleanness He died your death, was thrown overboard for you, that you – and all people, no one excluded – have a place in that celebration. He simply says: come!

And He has provided the clothing – the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness that He puts on you in Holy Baptism. Your own clothes, your own righteousness and deeds and good works are filthy rags. No matter who you are, how accomplished or revered in this world and life, you cannot come on your own terms. You need to be clothed with Christ, with His forgiveness and life.

And He has provided a little feast here for you – in His Supper – as a prelude to the big and never-ending feast. Nothing you can do here, either. This meal is to keep and sustain you in His forgiveness and faith until the final call goes out – when the angels are sent at the final harvest. And this really is a picture of the ship. For here, it doesn't matter who you are – how old or young, how educated or uneducated, white collar or blue-collar worker, new to the faith or a long-timer, healthy or sick, really good or really bad in the eyes of the world. Here, you all come to this Table the same – sinners coming with nothing to give but our sins, and receiving the gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And maybe we too sometimes think we have something better to do and take what happens here and is given here and in the Word lightly – it's not just others, is it?

And maybe we don't think of our righteousness in terms of being baptized, but instead that it's because I'm doing alright, not sinning so much, getting better and so my own clothes aren't so bad.

Or we think of God as a demanding God instead of a giving God. A boss instead of a King who wants us simply to come to His feast.

If that's you, repent, and change your thinking. That's why Jesus told this parable, after all. To change your thinking. That you realize who He is and what He's like. That you know all that He has done for you and wants for you. And that you come.

As one pastor I heard on this text said once: Coming to church isn't supposed to be like getting a colonoscopy! Though some treat it that way. No, it's coming to receive gifts, and getting ready to get on the ship. That by remembering our baptism, being absolved, and eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Jesus, we be ready for the call to come, whenever it comes, and rejoice in the Lord always. And forever.

And once you know that, you'll live like it. You'll know the value of the things of this world and life compared to the gifts your Father has waiting for you. And you'll use them in that way. And you'll not only rejoice, but live also, as Paul said, in peace. No matter what happens or comes upon you in this world and life. For the things of this world and life come and go, sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly. But the promise of your Father and His gifts are safe and waiting for you.

That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. So rejoice and come. Come and rejoice. It is for you.