

“An Invitation”

Psalm 106:1-5; Philippians 4:1-9;
Matthew 22:1-14

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What if you received an invitation to a wedding? It hasn't been that many years since we had a royal wedding. What if you received an invitation to a royal wedding? Would you go? It would be an incredible invitation. Unexpected, in my life. But the thought of a royal wedding and being invited to it is the kind of invitation we hear Jesus talking about today.

It's in a particular context. When you think about being invited to a royal wedding, there's something extra. It's not just a wedding. It's an incredible, important wedding. There's a fanfare that goes with it. When you decide to go to a royal wedding there is, in a sense, an agreement that it is a royal wedding. In some sense you are giving that ceremony the power of the royalty as well. You are acknowledging that royalty.

When Jesus is talking about this kind of royal wedding, there is a little extra symbolism added in because oftentimes the covenant was understood symbolically as a marriage so that there was a sense of covenant involved as well. So, when you are acknowledging the wedding, you are also acknowledging the covenant. As people heard Jesus talking about this idea of a wedding, a marriage, and people being invited to it, they would have had in their background the idea of being invited into the covenant.

Then Jesus talks about having messengers who went out and were ill-treated and not listened to. People would have heard that idea and thought of the prophets coming to God's people, encouraging them to give their commitment to that covenant and stay with it. This idea that the son is getting married is a continuation of that idea. There is a new aspect to that covenant.

So, when people say they're not going to come, it is saying, "I don't have the respect. I don't give you the authority. I don't care who you are." And this is to the king. Or in Ireland, they would say the High King, the one at the top. It is a reminder to us that it is an idea of the relationship to God through the covenant, through God the Creator being willing to take care of and be with God's people, and that God clearly has some authority. It's not just any invitation. It's the invitation, as we think about it, of the creator of the world, of all that is, of the one who has given us life. And yet, there is this idea that we can turn it down, and that people do.

I think to that point it's pretty straightforward. The struggle always comes for me with this piece about the king going out and creating consequences for those who don't come. After all, as the Psalmist and the Gospel of John said, I usually think about the steadfast love of God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son. God is so loving, how could there be a consequence?

What I began to think about was how I, as a parent, love my children, but when they were growing up I didn't let them do everything they wanted. Sometimes there were consequences. They knew that there were behaviors that were appropriate and inappropriate. At least I hope they learned that. It was our intention to guide them and to help them recognize that there are consequences to their actions. As we live in this world, I think we recognize that there are consequences to our actions. So would there be no consequences to actions like ignoring what God tells us, going in different directions?

When we were much younger and had young children, we took a parenting class. They were teaching us about how to help children understand consequences, and to be able to do that in ways that made sense. What they talked about were natural and logical consequences. A natural consequence is something like if you leave a bike out in the rain and it gets rusted. The child gets upset about it, but it is a natural consequence of not putting the bike away. That's a natural consequence.

The logical consequence was if you didn't come home when the parent asked you to come home, you broke the curfew, so you don't get the same privilege you had. You have to change when you come home, and work back up to creating the trust that you will come home at the right time. So there's that logical consequence.

It feels perhaps like God also treats us in that way. There are natural and logical consequences to what we do and who we are. Even in this parable, there's a fellow who comes to the wedding and doesn't put on the wedding clothes that he is given. He doesn't put on the robe he's been given to be part of the celebration. I don't know exactly what that custom was and why it was important, but what it illustrates is the logical consequence that the king has him thrown out. He was asked to do something, and he didn't do it, and so he doesn't get to be at the wedding banquet.

In my life, I think I've tried so much to understand the grace of God that I've sometimes left out the consequences that we struggle with, and that there are things that are natural and logical consequences to our actions and who we are. This parable suggests that when we disregard God's will, that when we go in a different direction than God would have us go, that when we encounter those natural and logical

consequences, we have weeping. We are in the darkness and we have weeping and gnashing of teeth. One reason I struggle with this parable so much is because to me it feels a little bit like a time of weeping and gnashing of teeth right now.

The parable is inviting us to recognize that there are consequences to our actions. How do we deal with those? I always hope that we can hear God enough, that we can recognize God's will for us that we don't have to experience those kinds of consequences. Indeed, the Psalm suggests that happy are those who do the will of God. Happy are those who do justice and live out righteousness. The parable seems to be suggesting that we are invited to the joy of being in God's presence, the celebration of God's son, the grace God would help us know, the wonder of that relationship with God, but that we can turn our backs. We can live our lives in ways that don't engage us with God's will.

How we live as individuals, as communities, as nations, matters. Really, we all know that what we do in our lives has consequences. This is just recognizing that if we can listen to God, the kinds of consequences will change. They are different. We can have the weeping and gnashing of teeth. We can have the sorrow and anguish. Or we can have the joy as we listen to God and make sure justice, and righteousness, and the will of God is done.

Perhaps it is because I have felt this time of darkness and struggle that it has made me think over my own life and how I engage and what I do that fits or doesn't. How I live out justice and righteousness, or don't. I feel that this is not only an invitation to a banquet, it is an invitation to joy. It's an invitation to recognize that if we go somewhere else, we won't find that joy. And, if we don't listen to God, there are consequences. Amen.