

Invitation to the Feast (P-21-05 A pr23)

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliott, Jr

The parable which you just heard from Matthew, is, in many respects similar to the parable of the Great Feast preserved by Luke (14:16-24). These verses actually form not one parable, but two. The events of this story, while strange to us, were completely in accordance with normal Jewish custom. When the invitations to a great feast, like a wedding feast, went out, the time was not stated. It was like a warning order for a military operation; “stand by to move out!” Then when everything was ready and all the preparations made, the servants were sent out with a final summons to tell the guests to come, and it was at this point that the final invitation was insultingly refused by those friends who had been invited.

The parable has two meanings, one of which was strictly local. Its local meaning was a driving home of what had already been said in another parable. Once again it was an accusation of the Jews. From the earliest times they had been invited by God to be his chosen people, yet when God’s Son came into the world and they were invited to follow him, they contemptuously refused the invitation. So, the invitation of God went out directly to those in the thoroughfares and streets, to the sinners and the gentiles, who never expected an invitation into the Kingdom of God.

But the parable has much to say on a far wider scale. It reminds us that the invitation of God is an invitation to joy, the joy of communion with God. To think of Christianity as a gloomy and maudlin giving up of everything which brings happiness and laughter and good times is to mistake its whole nature. It is to *joy* that we are invited and it is *joy* we miss if we refuse the invitation.

The parable reminds us that, the things which make us deaf to the invitation of Christ, are not necessarily bad things in themselves. One man went to his farm, another went to his business. They didn’t go off to a wild weekend at the casinos. They went off to do things that had to be done. The tragedy of life is that it is so often the “second bests,” good things in themselves, which shut out the things that are supreme. We can be so busy making a living, we forget how to make a life. We can be so busy with the administration and the organization of life that we forget life itself.

It reminds us, too, that in the last analysis God’s invitation to us is the invitation to grace.....God’s gift to us. Those gathered in from the thoroughfares and the streets had no claim on the King at all. They could never, ever, have expected an invitation to the wedding feast, still less could they have deserved it, or so they thought. It came to them from nothing other than the open-armed, loving,

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generous hospitality of the King. It was *grace* which offered the invitation and it was *grace* which gathered them in.

The second parable within a parable is the story of the guest who appeared at the royal wedding feast without a proper wedding garment. Jesus had just told them that the King, to fill his tables with guests, sent his messengers out to find anyone they could and bring them in, sort of an open door policy. While it is true the door may be open to everyone, we can't go on living the life we lived before we encountered Jesus Christ. We must be clothed, if you will, in a wedding garment. There are garments of the mind, of the heart and of the soul....the garment of expectation, the garment of humble penitence, the garment of faith, the garment of reverence.....these are the garments without which we ought not dare to approach God. The door *is* open, but the door is *not* open that the sinner may come and go and remain a sinner; the door is open that the sinner may come in and become a saint. Most of us look for guarantees, for assurance that each step we take will be safe and worthwhile. *We will not* find them.

There is a paradox in all of this. Within our consciousness we may truly want this spiritual life....this grace....but, then we find all manner of reasons not to seek it. On the other hand, we may have little taste for grace, yet find ourselves drawn irresistibly towards it, despite our resistance. On one level we choose whether or not to heed the call of grace....on another, God is the one who does the choosing. How do we resolve this? The truth of the matter is that we don't. We cannot will ourselves to grace. We can, by will, however, open ourselves to be receptive to it, if we can focus and make ourselves completely loving individuals with no hope of reward, and in so doing, the reward of God's love....God's grace....which we have not sought, will find us.

The invitation has gone out, through Jesus Christ, for twenty centuries. The invitation is still going out in an age of drugs and prejudice and murder and violence and corruption, an age when we most need it. We often run away because we know that God will ask our total and unconditional self-giving. He pursues us like the hound in Francis Thompson's poem *The Hound of Heaven*:

He wrote:

I Fled Him, down the nights and down the

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days; I fled Him, down the arches of the

years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter...

From those strong feet that followed, followed

After.

He wrestles with us. He wants us.

There is a magnificent book called *Prayers*, they're poetic prayers really, written by a French Abbot named Michael Quoist. One of his prayers is entitled *Help me to say Yes*. It reads in part:

I am not at peace.

You pursue me Lord, you besiege me.

I turn from the road...but at the end of the path

You are awaiting me.

Where shall I hide.....I meet you everywhere.

I am afraid of your demands, for you are a jealous

God.

I am captured, yet I struggle and I fight knowing

that I am defeated.

At the end, Quoist writes:

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O Lord, I am afraid of your demands, but who can resist you? That your kingdom may come and not mine, that your will may be done and not mine, Help me to say YES.

Help us to say yes!

AMEN.