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You're Invited

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Psalm 106:1-6; 19-23; Matthew 22:1-14

We are living in a strange times, when something as normal as going to a wedding is something we have not been able to do. It is disappointing, and we all are feeling it. As a minister, I am long accustomed to presiding at weddings. (The last time I checked, more than 250 of them.) And with the wedding comes joy and celebration. I don't know about you, but upon a few occasions, I have retrieved my place card before going into the reception and found, when I got to table number whatever, that the people I was seated with were going to be a challenge to talk with — whether known or unknown to me beforehand. It then comes back to me that I am not at the wedding for me. I am at the wedding for the wedding party. I have been invited to the wedding because I have some particular connection to the bride or the groom or their families, and so have these folks, around each table.

The point of the gathering is not so much whether the guests are happy — although families do their utmost for that to happen. The more important point of the gathering is that we are there to share in the newly wedded couple's joy.

Share in the joy! That is a great reason to get together. Why would anyone stay away from sharing in the joy? But apparently there are those who would — at least, according to what Jesus says.

Now, here in this parable of Jesus, there are people who would rather not share in the joy. They were more interested in their farms and businesses. They were cruel toward the king's slaves. They ridiculed them. They beat them. They killed them. If it sounds like what happened to most of the Old Testament prophets, and to John the Baptist, and to all but one of the twelve Apostles (the exception being John), and most importantly, to Jesus Himself — well, that is not a coincidence.

And there have been ever so many more, who since that time have said to their world, "Come and share the joy." And the reaction has been as cruel as those in the parable.

As John Calvin says:

"Not all of the whole company of those that are called by the voice of the gospel are the true Church before God: for the most part of them would rather follow the conveniences of this life: and some persecute very cruelly those that call them: but they are the true Church who obey when they are called, such as for the most part are those whom the world despises." (Geneva Notes)

So we have these servants of God saying, "Come and share in the joy." And we have people who refuse. People who are not like what we read in our Old Testament Psalm:

Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever. Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all His praise? Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

If we are keeping in mind that the kingdom of God is like this, then, according to what Jesus says, God is not going to stand for it — yes, that very same God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Slow to anger is not the same as "never gets angry," according to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I read this parable and I want to identify either with the slaves or with the people out in the streets who were the last to be invited. I certainly do not want to have any part of saying "no" to sharing the joy. And I want to be properly dressed for the occasion — robed in the garments of humility and hope.

The slaves did what they were told to do, and did it to the best of their ability. We know that they were hardworking and dedicated, and that they felt honor-bound to the king.

So, too, it is with all who identify with them. They will go and do as the king commands. They will not rest until they have fulfilled their duty. They will do so with all that they have. And they do so not expecting any particular reward. So many Christians down through the centuries have given their whole lives in this way; they have served well and long. And many have been unsung, and may have paid harsh prices for it. But these things did not prevent them from doing the main thing, which was to say to the world: "You are invited. Come and share the joy of Jesus Christ."

If it is too hard to wrap my head around identifying with those slaves, then I want to identify with the people out in the streets, who were the last to be invited. I am fascinated by the fact that they were the ones who came. They were the ones who responded. They were not the first to be singled out — far from it. They may not have appeared to be the most likely guests, but they were the most willing. Maybe no one had ever said to them: "You're invited." Before that, the very thought of sharing in joy was something that seemed so far beyond their reach, that they had given up all hope of it happening, a very long time before.

No matter. The invitations came, and they said yes.

I like to think that, once they got to the reception and found their place card, they went to their assigned table, and then thought to themselves: "How in the world am I going to make conversation with these other people around the table?" But then, they sat down, and guess what? They found that what they had in common was more than their differences; that what made them unique also made them fascinating to the others; that their story added so much to the whole story. "How do you know the bridal party?" someone on one side of them might say. And then they could tell their story.

Or, in like manner, the people they had not met yet unfolded how they were connected to the key figures of the event. And that began a whole new chapter of friendship and service and meaning.

Oh, by the way, I learned this from Janet Hunt, in her book, *Dancing with the Word* (2014):

"In a parable which is so hard to comprehend, it does at least help me understand its meaning when I realize that the wedding robes were actually provided to the guests."

Ah. I get it now! **The king is doing all of the providing, from the first invitation, down to the robes of celebration.** The only thing you or I have to do is to say, "Yes."

You're invited. Come to the party. I hope I will see you there. Amen.