

October 12, 2014 – Matthew 22:1-14  
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### As You Are

What a strange king, this king in today's parable. Impetuous and demanding, his violent orders remind me of another person of royalty, the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*. For even minor infractions, the Queen of Hearts would order, "Off with your head!" The king in today's gospel has some of that imperiousness—though not all he orders is destruction. The parable begins with the king deciding to have a feast, to throw a celebration for his son, and so he sends out invitations. From the beginning, what the king is saying is, "Come to the party."

But those invited do not come. So he king sends out reminders, with more detail, describing the rich feast that will be on offer, a feast like the one Isaiah had in mind in the first reading today. But those invited still don't come. Some make light of it. They have to work; they have other things to do. Others are hostile to those bearing the invitation. In fact, they kill them. Which is strange, since the message wasn't bad news. The message, you'll remember, was an invitation: "Come to the party." For this they kill the messenger?

It's clear, now, that as parables often do, this story is veering into absurdity—and it just keeps getting stranger. The snubbed king sends in an army, orders mass executions, burns the city to the ground. All of which is absolutely illogical if the goal, still, is to throw a party. Didn't the king just scorch the meal? And the guests?

Somehow, attendees may still be found, both good and bad, the story says, and they come, just as they are—no doubt shell-shocked and smelling of smoke. I'm guessing they didn't waste any time changing first. With the city in embers, they were probably wearing all they had. But in what just might sound like the crowing absurdity, the enraged king grabs one of those guests and banishes him, because the kind doesn't like what the guest is wearing. "You're not dressed for a party!" the king roars. Off with your head!

It's a strange story. You might think that it's an especially strange story on a day on which we invite new members to join us at this our holy feast. Actually, it's perfect. Not just because this is a church that eats, and no, we don't have a dress code. It's perfect, this strange parable, perfect in its parabolic wisdom, for the two important things it says for new people here, and old people here, and anyone else here who is anywhere in between.

First, Come. All of you here, you have heard this. You have heard God's invitation, to come for the party he's throwing for us, in celebration of his son. We are here because God offers us a banquet—life, and love, and forgiveness. We are here because generous invitation is how God's relationship with us begins. From the beginning, fundamentally, always and inherently, grace is an invitation, a free gift offered to us. God says, take it. Take and eat it. Like the king in the parable, God keeps sending these invitations, and follow-ups to them, with additional detail. There are so many different ways that God keeps saying to us, Come to the party—which is to say, see God's generous grace at work in your life, celebrate the way God has made you, and redeemed you, and empowered you. Come to the party.

Along with this great generosity, because of this great generosity, there is an urgency to the invitation. Even though there's the farm, your business, don't make light of it. You don't want to miss the party! Sometimes, I forget the generosity, and just go to the urgency. Sometimes, when I'm crabby, or when I'm fearful, I start to sound like the king as the parable progresses, when he's more like the Queen of Hearts. When I do this, "Come to the party!"

starts to sound like, “Come to the party!” That’s not the way God invites us. This parable can be a good reminder, don’t kill the people you invite. When I get like this, God sends faithful people who tell me I’m being absurd, people here, today, who remind me, fundamentally, always and inherently, the model of Christian life is God’s gracious generosity, not king.

But like this king, and like Isaiah’s call, God’s invitation is expansive. Like this king, God says, whatever else you have to do, wherever else you were going to go, Come. Come, from wherever you are. Come from South Korea, and Iran, and Puerto Rico, and Oak Park, and across the street. New members, and old members, we come from many places, to here. We come from other Christian traditions, or we are newly coming to Christianity. In a fundamental way, we are all always coming to Christianity. As Lutheran Christians we come deeply formed by the Roman Catholic church; we come, all of us, and confess our faith in one holy catholic church.

Come, the parable says, from whatever you are doing, from wherever you are, whoever you are. Come. Whether you have been worshipping for years, or if this church is still new to you. Whether you can recite the books of the Bible, or if you there are large chunks you don’t know that well. Whether saying the creed fills you with awe, or if it seems a strange string of words. Whether you are feeling generous and festive or crabby or fearful. Come, if you are any of these, or all of these. I am. I am all of them. God says to us, Come, whoever you are. Like those in the parable, invited from the streets. God says, come to the party! Everyone, good and bad. It’s not what you did that earns you the invitation. Come, as you are.

That’s the first point of the parable. Come. Come as you are...but, don’t stay as you are. That’s the second thing this parable says, “Don’t stay as you are.” That’s the point of the robe, that strange part at the end of the parable, this poor guy who gets kicked out for wearing the wrong clothes. Now, despite what some may have said in the past, this parable does not mean you have to dress up for church. We just had a conversation about this with the Confirmation students, actually in the context of church reform. We were talking about shoes, about what kind of shoes you have to wear when you are an acolyte. “You have to wear shoes,” we said.

You do not have to dress up for church, but you do have to change.

That’s the point of the robe in the parable. This guy at the end, he came to the party, but he didn’t change. He didn’t put on party attire. He’s not getting punished for something he didn’t have. All we have comes from God. We get our party robes the day we get baptized. Put them on! God says. You are at a party! Look the part! You are at a party! Act like it! You don’t have to dress up, but you do have to change.

You will change. If you are encountering the living word of God, in this place, and amongst these people, in your life, you will change. You will find yourself being led in paths of righteousness. You will make different decisions about the work you do, and the people with whom you work, and how you work with them. You will find yourself drawn down roads of honesty, and integrity, and justice. And when those roads get difficult, you will find that you can walk them. You can walk even in the valley of the shadow of death, without fear, for you know that God is with you. People say it to me, time and again, “I don’t know how I would have gotten through that hard, hard time, without faith, without God and this community.” And you will arrive at a table that is overflowing with blessings. You will see your whole life as a blessing, all of it a generous gift, a dwelling in the house, in the palace, in the kingdom of God. You will see that, and you will become a generous person, too.

You will change, because our king is not like the Queen of Hearts. Our king is the Good Shepherd. Our king, is the king of love.