

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 (using the Gospel text assigned to 10/12)  
Matthew 22:1-14

*The Power of the Invitation*

I'm not sure we ought to ever underestimate the power of an invitation<sup>i</sup>. Now perhaps some people get so many invitations to so many different events that it becomes rather old hat. But, for most of us, we still get a bit of a thrill whenever we get the mail, flip through the bills and the ads, and something else catches our eye. Maybe it is an invitation to a birthday party or to a graduation. Or maybe, like in today's parable, the envelope has that special wedding shape. You tear open the envelope to read all the details – who, what, where, when, and, of course, expected attire. And these days, expected attire can be very confusing.

I get nervous when I read things like “dressy casual” or “festive attire.” I never quite know what those kinds of designations are supposed to mean. What if my version of dressy casual is drastically different from the host's understanding? I would hate to show up and look completely out of place. You get to a wedding wearing slacks and a button-down shirt and realize that you are the only one not in black tie.

Or, you show up at the Halloween party in your full-out witch costume-- face painted green, a pointy nose with a wart affixed to your face, hair sticking straight out and spray-painted purple under your black hat-- only to discover that everyone else, whom you really do not know very well, is still wearing what he or she wore to work that day and it is not a costume party after all. Whenever things like that happen to me, I am always emotionally transported back to those middle-school days where I constantly felt unacceptable, no matter where I was or what I was wearing. It is simply not fun to show up at a party and feel completely out of place.

We are not sure how the wedding guest in our parable felt about his attire. You know who I am talking about. At one moment he is stuffing his face with the grooms' cake and then next thing he knows, he is tossed into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That wedding guest. He is hard to forget. But, before we spend any more time on him, we need to back up a bit in Jesus' parable.

In the parable, the first guests whom the king invited to the wedding feast refused to come. And theirs' was an unexpected response. One does not just refuse an invitation to the royal wedding. And yet, that is exactly what they did. They completely snubbed the king and his invitation.

But the king, in an unprecedented move, tried once more. He sent out his messengers again, instructing them to tell all of those high-society, well-connected, leaders in church and community folks about how good everything was going to be at the party—how he had already prepared the full dinner and everything was ready and waiting for their arrival. We can assume that the king figured that if they only knew how amazing the party was going to be; how it would be one of those “once in a lifetime,” bound to be on Page 6 of the New York Post kinds of parties; then **surely** they would come.

But, astoundingly enough, once again, the people on the A list—the movers and the shakers, the leaders in church and community—they refused the invitation. One went off to his farm and his responsibilities. He had to supervise his staff. Someone had to make sure things got done around there. Another one listened to the messenger's spiel, shook his head no, and went straight back to the office (I mean, especially in this economy, who has time for parties, really!)

But some of them did not just ignore the second invitation. They acted with extreme malice, killing the messengers. This act of unprovoked evil enraged the king. So he put everything on hot plates and immediately waged war.

Side note—this is when you once again remind yourself that we are dealing in parable here. Jesus is clearly using the outrageous language of extremes to make a point. I mean – everyone knows that most wedding food barely stays warm through the post-ceremony picture taking, certainly not through a war! Oh and – even a King or Queen usually does not start a war just because someone did not RSVP appropriately. Jesus is clearly trying to shock us into paying attention.

But, back to the parable. Now, if this had happened to me--- if I had decided to throw an amazing party and my guests had refused to come, not once, but twice—I would give up. And that is not even taking into account the whole killing the messenger and waging war part of this story. Being rejected twice would have been enough for me. But, apparently, the king is not like me. He is bound and determined to have a party, **by God**. And if those A list'ers would not get over themselves long enough to come, then he would invite everyone else he could—regardless of who they were or what they did or even the value of their character.

Once again, the king sent his messengers out, this time into the main streets in order to fill the great hall with laughter and with joy. Now – let's be clear about what “the main streets” mean in this parable. Jesus is telling us that the king sent his messengers over to Harry Hines in Dallas, down to Nursery in South Irving, to walk through the concrete courtyard of The Bridge. These were the places where the king's messengers were sent.

And once they got over the shock of seeing the royal messengers pull up with the sound of trumpets announcing their arrival, the people on the main streets were beyond thrilled to receive such a gracious invitation. Some of them did not even have an address to which an invitation could be sent. Many of them never received invitations to anything anymore. Or rather, the only invitations they received were ones to the County jail for panhandling or public intoxication.

So you can imagine what it felt like for them to receive an invitation from the king to go to the royal wedding party! They were pinching each other to make sure they were not dreaming. And they weren't. So they all went. People from the highways and byways; from big cities and one stop-light towns. They came from east and west and from north and south and walked into that royal feast room. They inhaled the good smells of their favorite foods and saw the waiters walking around serving wine and punch, and they just could not believe it was really happening to **them**. What generosity. What absolutely unmerited, outrageously extravagant, unbelievably deep grace the king was bestowing upon them.

They were so taken aback by this gracious invitation that they all wanted to know what they could do in return. “How can we pay you back?” they asked, one after another. “What can we do for you? How can we show you how grateful we are?”

But the king smiled. “No, no,” the king said. “You cannot pay me back for this, nor do I want you to. This is the joyful feast. This is my gift. But, you can go over there, and receive the new garment that I have prepared just for you.” And the king pointed over across the room, near the front door, where the messengers were busily handing out beautiful new wedding robes in all sizes, one for each guest.

And if you were there, you saw the change in people that night. First, so many of them had tears in their eyes over receiving such an unmerited, extravagant, and gracious invitation to come to the feast. They never expected such an opportunity to come their way. They had written themselves off as unworthy years ago. So the gift of the invitation blew them away.

But then, once they arrived, they realized they were also being given a second gift at that feast. They were being invited to change. They were being invited to change out of who they had always been, into who they

could become as a party guest of the king. The king loved them for who they were—it was definitely a “come as you are” invitation.

But the king also loved them too much to let them stay that way. The king loved them too much to just let them stay in their soiled clothes, spiritual shirttails hanging out, old habits and old resentments staining their shirts, old fear and old anger eating holes in their pants. No—here at the feast—here at the table, they all were invited to take off those old, soiled ways of being and living, in order to put on the beautiful, custom-designed wedding robe of new life and discipleship. And the people who came were ready. They wanted to change into the wedding robes. They wanted to put on their new baptismal garments. For as soon as they walked in and looked around, they realized that their old lives were out of place at God’s great party. They had new lives now.

Well, almost all of them had new lives, new ways of being and living and loving that reflected the generosity and grace of the King (or Queen). For we now return back to the one wedding guest that stuck out like a sore thumb—the one who was still in his street clothes. It is hard to know how it happened, exactly. He came in the doors with everyone else, but yet he somehow either missed the wedding garment station near the entrance of the party; or, he saw it and then saw the incredible buffet that stood right past the door. Whatever his reason, he decided to skip the whole changing one’s clothes/changing one’s self extravaganza in favor of being first in line for the mounds of peel and eat shrimp.

Preacher Tom Long describes the moment this way:

Sure- the spotlighted guest was pressed in off the street unexpectedly and was probably wearing cutoffs and clodhoppers, but, when he got inside, only a fool would fail to see that difference between what he wore and where he was. He was at the wedding feast for the royal son. He is the recipient of massive grace. Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? The other guests quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive wedding garments of worship and celebration, but there he is, bellying up to the punchbowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt. When the host demands to know where his wedding garment is, he is speechless, and well he should be.<sup>ii</sup>

And when the wedding guest could not come up with a single reason as to why he had not changed, other than his own spiritual gluttony and narcissism, the king tossed him out. The party’s bouncers came over, took him by his arms, and threw him out into the outer darkness.

My goodness. Don’t you think the other guests were more than a bit startled? But it is just a parable, right? Jesus uses the outrageous language of extremes to make a point. Jesus is clearly trying to shock us into paying attention. And I think it is safe to say that his story-telling tactics work.

Yes—one should never underestimate the power of an invitation. And perhaps, one should also never underestimate the value of one’s response.

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<sup>i</sup> I am grateful to Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin and her wonderful insight about the invitation theme. I carried it over into the bulletin for this particular Sunday. Meg offered her ideas at the Spring 2008 gathering of “The Portable Snack.”

<sup>ii</sup> Long, Tom. Matthew. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.