

Charting our course with God: #1 “Invited to Sail” Matthew 22:1-14

God calls us to accept an invitation to follow Christ with wholehearted devotion, setting our sails so that we might experience the joyful feast God has planned.

What a strange parable. I wonder what would have happened if before deciding to murder his erstwhile guests, the King might have thought about writing a letter to advice columnist Judith Martin, better known to us as “Miss Manners.”

Dear Miss Manners: I hope you can help me decide on what to do. I am a mighty king, and my son is about to get married. I sent out “save the date” cards six months in advance. Eight weeks before the wedding, I sent out an official invitation. Then, the day before the event, I sent all of my servants to go and round up the guests. They knocked on the doors of everyone who had been invited, but they would not come. So, I tried sending out additional servants. They went and told the guests that the prime rib was just about done, and the wines had been poured. But that didn’t work out any better. Some of those people laughed at my servants and walked away, but, can you imagine, some even murdered my servants.

The wedding is about to start, but no one has accepted my invitation. Signed, The Testy King.

I heard a story recently about a Methodist pastor who was helping distribute food at his church’s food pantry. He got into a great conversation with a young mother who was standing in line with her toddlers. She tried to avoid eye-contact, but the pastor was determined to show God’s love to her. They had a wonderful conversation, and as he handed her a bag of groceries, he said, “You know, we’d love to have you come to church some time.” The woman’s face reddened with embarrassment. “Pastor,” she said. “That is so kind. But we do not have nice clothes to wear to church. I don’t think your congregation would want us.” “Nonsense!” the pastor replied. “You’re welcome anytime.”

The next week, the pastor was again helping out at the food pantry. He saw the young mother come through the line. He caught her attention, and asked if she’d stick around for a moment after she got her bag of food. The pastor ran to his office to get a back of donated clothes he had collected for her. “Here,” he said, “maybe these will make you feel more comfortable about coming to church.”

Well, Sunday came and went, and the pastor did not see the woman. So, when he spotted her at the food pantry the next week, he stopped her and asked if the clothes he gave her fit ok. “Oh, pastor,” she replied, “they were beautiful! In fact, they were too nice to wear to your church, so I went to the Presbyterian church instead!”

Accepting an invitation matters—but what also matters is that the invitation can change us.

Here’s the tension I see in this story: Matthew tells us that Jesus has entered Jerusalem, and that he has been confronted by the religious authorities. But he has also been pursued by the sick, the blind, and all those who have been crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:14). Concerned about all of this behavior, the authorities try to corner Jesus. “By what authority do you do these things?”

They refuse to accept God's invitation.

In the parable, all sorts of excuses are given, But the bottom line is that no one sees the value in what the king is offering. Clearly, this is no ordinary wedding feast. Just when you're expecting the upbeat Franck Eggelhoffer, the fictitious wedding planner played by Martin Short in *Father of the Bride*, Linda Blair's character from *The Exorcist* shows up instead.

You do not need to be Miss Manners to feel the shame and rejection the king experiences. Anyone who has ever planned a wedding can identify at least partially with the king's response. Weddings invariably fray our nerves, and this one is no exception. The banquet is ready, the tables at set. But when he sends out his servants to collect the guests, no one shows up. Even when he sends his servants out a second time, they still refuse – and some even respond by murdering the king's servants.

The king is not at all pleased, and sets off on his own course of murderous revenge.

Does that make you think twice about not signing up for church events ahead of time? I have often joked that we become so casual about RSVP's that if we announced Jesus was coming to church next week, people would have to pull out their calendars first to see if they could make it. The story is implausible, even frightening.

Given the violence of our world, especially the violence we have seen in the Middle East this week, this parable can be hard to accept. Luke's Gospel tells a far simpler tale, but Matthew has stripped all of the subtle signs and left us with a very difficult story.

But listen to how Matthew intended it to be heard. It is, by all accounts, an allegorical tale. Allegories can often be far-fetched. While Luke's Gospel tells a far simpler and easier to understand version of this tale, Matthew has avoided all subtlety. In this tale, the real setting is not a wedding feast, but the kingdom. Matthew isn't talking about parties, but is instead telling us a story of the demands of life as a disciple.

In this story, the king is God; the son is Jesus; the feast is the promised banquet of the kingdom of heaven; and those who reject the invitation represent the religious elite of Jesus' time. (Remember that Israel does not refer to modern day Israel or Jews.)

It's a snapshot, says Tom Long, of Matthew's church. Matthew's replacement guests are an odd assortment of both good and bad. They are what we might call a bunch of misfits or a closet full of broken toys. Once more we are reminded that many who are last shall be first, that the tax collectors and prostitutes are headed into the kingdom ahead of those with more polish and status. And by the end of the story, they are crowded into the banquet hall like wedding guests shoehorned into the banquet room of the local Holiday Inn.¹

Not just A-list celebrities or those who look good on the runway. All people, not just Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce. But is that actually the case? Because when the king gets there and starts working the crowd, his eyes land on someone who apparently has never watched a single episode of "What Not to Wear."

Once more the story takes a troubling turn. The guest sticks out like a sore thumb, and the king is not having it. "Let me show you to your table," he tells the guest, and promptly has the man thrown into the outer darkness—which I presume is even worse than being sat next to the odd cousin.

¹ Thomas G. Long, [Matthew](#), ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 247.

What do we make of all of this?

Indeed, God has invited all to this banquet. But those who come, those who accept the invitation are called to a new way of living. The wedding garment they are called to wear would have been roughly equivalent to the baptismal garments early Christians would have worn at baptism. Those called in Christ, says Paul, wrap themselves in the likeness of God, a garment of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12).

To shift the metaphor, those who are invited aboard the vessel of God's grace are invited to unfurl their sails so that their lives may be directed by God's Holy Spirit.

Early generations of Christians adopted a sailboat as the image of the church. Gathered on this boat, they were no longer slaves forced to row according to the slave master's commands, but freed to enjoy the billowing breeze of God's Holy Spirit. And it is the Spirit that moves our lives and our church forward in joyful mission and service.

Invitations are so very important. Too important to ignore. And God's invitation has particular meaning and even more consequences for ignoring it.

This morning, my mind is with the both the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. Both are invited to pursue peace, and yet the complications of violence have made that so unlikely. This morning, my mind is also with our dear sister Dottie, who is now resting in God's gentle arms. Dottie understood the meaning of an invitation – there was rarely an event here that she and Bob ever missed. But she also understood what it meant to be called by Christ to live a life of faithful witness. Her prayers, her ministry as a chaplain, her witness against injustice – all of that is a beautiful reminder that she understood what it meant to accept Christ's invitation.

Many are called, says Jesus, but few are chosen. It's worth pondering as you hold the invitation in your hands. Amen.