

October 12, 2008
The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

SHOWING UP

Matthew 22:1-14

A woman arrived late for a wedding. As she came rushing up to the door, an usher asked her for her invitation. “I have none,” she snapped. “Are you a friend of the groom?” he asked. “Certainly not!” the woman replied, “I’m the bride’s mother.” Weddings have a way of bringing out the best and the worst in people.

We live in a world where people rent tents and hire clowns and print invitations for a birthday party for a two-year-old. When the child turns 3 they try to outdo the previous party. In first century Palestine they lived in a world with one party – the wedding banquet. It was the one and the only grand occasion they would attend in their lifetime.

When invitations are sent not everyone called accepts. Once Winston Churchill received an invitation from George Bernard Shaw inviting him to attend one of his opening plays. The note read, “Dear Winston, Enclosed are two tickets to the performance of a play of mine. Bring a friend – if you have one.” Churchill sent back this reply: “Dear George, I thank you very much for the invitation and tickets. Unfortunately, I am engaged on that night, but could I have tickets for the second night? – if there is one.”

Some are very creative in making excuses. The Toronto Star invited teachers to submit excuses they had received from their students. One student explained why he was late: “I was kidnapped by aliens and interrogated for three hours.” Another student, telling why he had failed to turn in his essay: “The bus driver read it and liked it so much he kept it to show to his passengers.” Another: “I got mugged on the way to school. I offered him my money, my watch, and my penknife but all he wanted was my essay.”

Mike, a 14-year old, came up with a “watertight” excuse for arriving at school an hour late with his pants soaked to the knees: “I was just about to board the bus when I found I’d lost my ticket. Since it would take too long to walk to school, I hopped a fence onto a golf course. I headed for a creek

that crisscrossed several fairways until I found a likely spot for lost balls. Retrieving three balls from their watery graves, I then made for the clubhouse where I sold the balls for bus fare! And that's why I'm late." Mike's entry won.

Sometimes people get invited but still feel unwelcome. Mrs. Jones was reading a letter from her mother. She looked up suspiciously at her husband. "Henry, I've just received a letter from Mother saying she isn't accepting our invitation to come and stay, as we do not appear to want her. I told you to write and tell her she was to come at her own convenience. You did write, didn't you?" "Yes I did," said the husband, "but I couldn't spell convenience so I wrote to come at your own risk."

"The King sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'" An earthly king would not likely send out a reminder for those who were late, but this is about the kingdom of heaven.

The attendance of the great people of the kingdom at the wedding feast of the king's son would be expected not only as a necessary expression of the honor they owed the king but also as an expression of their loyalty to the legitimate succession of his son to the throne. Political allegiance was at stake. Excuses would hardly be acceptable, and the invitees offer none.

Mostly the invitations to the banquet were ignored. Many are called but most don't show up. These were just people being responsible taking care of the business of life. Aren't we distracted with good things – family and work? But then sometimes there is violence toward the people of God around the world. In the parable, some seized the slaves and maltreated them and killed them as believers then and now around the world are sometimes maltreated and killed.

Even for those who ignored the invitation and went about their ordinary business it was tantamount to rebellion. In refusing it, the invitees are deliberately treating the king's authority and the King's Son with contempt. They knew full well that their behavior would be understood as insurrection, but evidently it meant little to them as people often take an invitation to

come and worship as of no importance. The king responded as kings do to insurrection. Thus they were killed and their city burned.

Then came the surprising second invitation to an entirely different group. The movers and shakers having declined to attend, the invitation was given to everyone, good and bad. In a season of intensive efforts by candidates to gain support for their candidacy, often by telling people what they want to hear instead of the truth, I like the story of Huey Long who was a very colorful Louisiana politician who had hopes of running for the presidency in 1936. He began as an unschooled farm boy and ended up in the governor's mansion, one of the most popular politicians in the history of the state.

Long was born in the central part of Louisiana, and when he first campaigned for governor, he was given some advice about the voters in the New Orleans area. "South Louisiana is different from the northern part of the state," he was told. "We have a lot of Catholic voters down here." Long nodded knowingly and went out to make his speech. It began, "When I was a boy, I'd get up at six every Sunday morning, hitch our old horse up to the buggy, and take my Catholic grandparents to mass. I'd bring them home and then take my Baptist grandparents to church."

The speech was a rousing success. Afterward, a New Orleans political boss said, "Huey, you've been holding out on us. We didn't know you had Catholic grandparents." Huey looked at him slyly and said, "We didn't even have a horse." Around the banquet table of God we won't be invited because we are Baptists, or Catholics. All are invited – some early, some late. But being invited and showing up, we learn in the parable, is essential, but it is not enough. Many are called. Some are sent away.

There was trouble because of what one banquet guest was wearing. What sort of garment did the King expect? One time when I was a college student and left to my own choice of clothes without mom seeing me before I left for school, I decided to experiment with clothes. I remember one time putting on what I thought of as a bold fashion statement. Rather proud of my innovative choice of clothes I asked my roommate, "What do you thing this looks like?" He quickly answered, "It looks like you didn't have anything else to wear."

What sort of garment did the King expect? Some of us are sartorially challenged and others gifted. I recall the time we were going out to a party

when I walked downstairs, dressed and ready to go only to be told, “If you must wear that sweater wear it with black pants.” Dutifully I went back upstairs to change into black pants. I walked downstairs only to be sent upstairs again because the slacks I had put on were the wrong color black. Who knew?

What sort of garment did the King expect? All people are welcome, but all behavior is not welcome. I was brought up that you wore a hat outside and took it off inside. I am offended when I sit in a restaurant and grown men sit there hat on head. I am offended by people who wear clothing that advertises beer, that uses foul language, that mentions sexual misadventure, and that is adorned with satanic symbols.

All people are welcome, but all clothing, all behavior is not welcome. A while ago we were at a wedding reception for the child of a long time friend. There we met a woman we have known for some years. After greeting one another she sat at another table near us and it became evident that she was taking advantage of the open bar. In time she became so loud that it became difficult for us to carry on a conversation sitting right next to one another. Getting drunk and loud at a wedding reception is an embarrassment to the couple and their families. Many are invited but may not be welcome again.

We are invited without qualification, but if we accept the invitation to the wedding banquet of the Son, some new appearance is expected of us. All people are welcome, but all behavior is not welcome. When we enter into the kingdom of heaven who we were is no longer who we are to be. We have not been invited to a place of sloth. We have not been given an invitation to go and do as we please, to become drunk and profane. We are guests of the king and are to behave as guests of the king in honor of his Son.

It is like people who want to join a church but don't want to make any particular commitment to new behavior and to new devotion, to attend worship or to offer to serve. It is like one man who told me, “I want to join the church in case I die.” I wanted to tell him, “In case you don't die maybe you can start your own church.”

Scholars tell us that in Jesus' time, kings sometimes gave their guests fine robes to wear during their visit. The king would have willingly supplied the right clothes for his guest. Evidently, though, the guest had not felt it

necessary to accept the king's offer of fine robes. He had chosen to stay in his old clothes instead.

God offers to clothe us anew. In Isaiah 61:10 it is written: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." What is suggested in Jesus' parable is that there is something expected of us. It is not something as superficial as clothing but its appearance is as noticeable as a new wedding outfit.

As St. Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

"Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

This is not one of the feel-good parables with a happy ending. Most called don't arrive or arrive unwilling to be part of life in that kingdom, clinging to the old ways. The King requested people to honor his invitation by showing up, to come and share the joy of the banquet. You may have heard the saying to the effect that showing up is a major part of success. Showing up is a major part of being faithful to Jesus. But there is more than showing up. It requires us to show up prepared for the banquet God has for us.

From time to time I will be about to conduct a wedding rehearsal when I find some well meaning friend or family member beginning to tell people how things are to be done. At that point I make a little speech like this: "Thank you for all being here. I note that some of you have come with ideas on how this wedding should be conducted. If you do have such ideas, please keep

them to yourself. The bride, groom, and I have discussed the plans for their wedding so keep your ideas for your own wedding.”

In other words, it is not about you. It is about the bride and groom. It is not about your convenience in attending. It is not about what you happen to like to wear. There is a heavenly banquet and we are the guests. Showing up is essential and when we arrive we are to be clothed in the things of God.

“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” and honor the Son of the King.