

## **Matthew 22:1-14**

A sermon by Tom Frame (11/10/20)

I don't do much face to face teaching anymore. It's more supervision of doctoral students but I give the occasional lecture to undergraduates and I always enjoy the experience. But gaining their attention and holding it isn't always easy. Why should they listen; why would they take notice of what I had to share? I usually begin with something challenging - even outrageous ... that they recognise is provocative or sensationalist and something I might not believe or want them to accept, but they continue to listen just to make sure. In other situations, I hope the students will not know what to expect or what I might say next. Of course, I want to persuade them of my view but I would by underlying objective is to cause them to think - really think, to test their own assumptions and to ask questions of their own prejudices and preferences, to see whether they make sense or can be defended.

So, in being outrageous and provocative, at some point I let the students know that they must not take what I am saying literally but nonetheless to take it seriously. This is my way of getting my listeners to look beyond conventional thinking in the hope of seeing a deeper truth, challenging preconceived ideas and expectations so that others might see something new, hear something new, think something new, and, ultimately, become something new. I wonder if that's what Jesus is doing in today's gospel from Matthew chapter 22. I wonder if he could have attached the same caveat to his parable as I do to outrageous statements to students? Here's what I mean.

Have you ever received an invitation to a party you really did not want to attend? What did you do in response? I'll bet you did not mistreat, abuse, and murder the Australia Post delivery person. That's what happens in this parable. Maybe Jesus is using hyperbole - deliberate exaggeration.

Have you ever invited people to your party who did not attend? You cleaned, you cooked, you decorated. The table was set, the candles were lit, the music was playing. Everything was ready but some of the guests didn't come. Did it make you so angry that you killed them and burned down their houses? Probably not, but that's what happens in this parable. Maybe Jesus is using hyperbole - again.

This parable of the King's son's wedding is so outrageous, so shocking, that it begs to be taken seriously but surely not literally. It begs to be taken as truth but not a practical example. Besides, to hear this parable and conclude that God is an angry king who, if he doesn't get his way, destroys his own people and burns their cities ... simply does not fit with the God revealed by Jesus Christ throughout the four gospels. If we tell that story as the gospel truth, I think Jesus might disown us as people who misunderstand him and his message.

No doubt, this is a parable of judgment, but it may not be the judgment we think it is. Speaking about the first group of guests the king says: "Those invited were not worthy." By implication those in the second-invited group were worthy. We tend to get nervous and fearful when God begins making judgments. It leaves us wondering whether we are in the first group or the second group. Are we unworthy or are we worthy?

I suspect our nervousness and fear about God's judgments arise from the assumption that God judges us ... in the same way ... we so often judge others. More often than not our judgments of others are judgments of exclusion and they can be excessive. What if the opposite is true with God? What if Jesus is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven is not business as usual ... according to our standards? That the good are blessed and the bad are damned - like the central character in the song "Santa Claus is coming to town"? What if God's judgment on our lives is animated by grace, acceptance, and invitation; a judgment of inclusion? If that's true then what separates or distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second?

The difference isn't that one was more deserving than the other. The first-invited guests were the recipients of the king's invitation and favour. But so were the second-invited guests. And so was the man who showed up without a wedding robe. They were all invited. They were all favoured. None of them had done anything to earn or deserve an invitation. It was just given. If that's true for them, it's true for us.

The difference isn't that the king likes one group more than the other group. His sole motivation is to share his banquet. He wants someone, anyone, everyone, to join in his joy and celebration, and be a part of his kingdom and life. Both groups were given the same opportunity. If that's true for them, it's true for us.

The difference isn't that some guests are good and others are bad. There is no distinction or judgment made based upon behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, or morals. To the contrary, with the second round of invitations

the king sends his servants into the main streets with the instruction to “invite everyone you find.” And they did. They “went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad.” If that’s true for them, it’s true for us.

That’s probably not the kind of social life most of us live, making indiscriminate offers to others, receive from others we don’t know. But the parable is talking about God’s kingdom not ours. So what is it? What’s the difference between those who were not worthy and those who were?

There’s only one thing that distinguishes the first-invited guests from the second-invited guests. Presence. The second-invited guests showed up. The first-invited guests did not. The “wedding hall was filled” with the second-invited guests but the first-invited guests “would not come”. That’s the only difference between the two groups. The key to our life with God is to just show up, to be present. That’s a lot easier said than done. To be present is difficult work. Think how difficult it is to be present to another person.

- It means establishing the other person as our priority.
- It means seeing them for who they are and not who we want them to be or think they should be.
- It means opening ourselves to receive their life into our own.
- It means the vulnerability of entrusting and giving our life to the other.
- It means really listening to what they say and not just what we hear or want to hear.
- It means letting go of our own agendas, distractions, fears, and prejudices.
- It means bringing and offering all that we are and all that we have.

If we’re not doing that with others, we’re probably not doing it with God. Instead, we too often go our separate ways, to our farms and places of work. We’re too busy, too tired, too distracted. There’s work to be done and money to be made. We make light of the other’s life and what is being offered. If we don’t earn it or work for it, we assume it has no value. After all you get what you pay for, right? We’re convinced we have better things to do and better places to be. That’s what the first-invited group did. What they did not realize, and what we sometimes do not realize, is that there is no life outside the banquet, the kingdom.

To show up and be present is to be worthy before God. It's that simple and it's that difficult. We don't earn or prove our worthiness as a prerequisite to entering the banquet. We show up, be present, and discover for ourselves the worthiness God has always known about us. That's when our lives begin to change.

But what about the guy who showed up without a wedding robe? This is about more than just a dress code violation. Something else was missing. "He was speechless." It was as if he wasn't really there. Jesus is reminding us that there are times when we show up but we're not really present. Our body is there but we've left the room.

So here's what I wonder. What if this man had said something, anything? What if he had just made his presence known, not so much to the king ... but to himself? What if he had said:

- I was hungry. I smelled the food. I trusted you to feed me.
- I was lonely. I saw the lights on. I trusted you to take me in.
- I was thirsty. I knew there would be wine. I trusted you to give me a drink.
- I was naked. I knew people would be well dressed. I trusted you to clothe me.
- I was sad and grieving. I heard music and laughter. I trusted you to share your joy.
- I was empty. I saw abundance. I trusted you to fill me.
- I was dying. I saw the door was open. I trusted you to give me life.

What if he had said any one of those, or a thousand others things, like them? It would have been enough. He would have shown up, with all that he was, and all that had. He would've been present. Then the king would have said to him, "Oh, my dear friend, I'm so glad you got my invitation. I'm so glad you are here. You are worthy."

And if that's true for him, then it's true for us.