

Sermon: Matthew 22:1-14 A Dangerous Banquet March 12, 2023 Lent 3**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev Steve Clifton**

It begins well, today`s gospel. It starts with a party. Sounds like fun. Everyone likes a party...Well everyone but the people in this story. When the King sends out invitations to a great feast in honour of his son, those on the guest list begin to make excuses.

So new invitations are sent out. This time the response is even worse. Not only are the invitations rejected but the messengers bringing them are killed. People really don`t want to go to this event. Polite rejection becomes murder.

But this King really wants this party to happen. He doesn`t give up. He tries again. This time, since the food and everything is already prepared and the caterer`s bill is already paid, he sends his servants out to invite anyone they can find: "Both the good and bad" And now people come.

And so far, this parable has a pretty familiar and comfortable message. The invitation is extended to all. All can come to the party that is the Kingdom of God. God`s love is all embracing and gracious and is available to all, if we will just accept the invitation and come...

It`s reminiscent of Gods great banquet in Isaiah 25, where the nations are gathered for a great celebration, where death is ended and every tear is wiped away.

It echoes with the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm where God prepares a table of welcome, where our cups run over with goodness. In Luke`s Gospel and in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas their versions of this parable end with a wide welcome and a fantastic feast.

But Matthew goes further... his version of the parable takes a darker turn.

The party begins. Everyone is seated. All are enjoying the Host`s hospitality. But then one of the guests comes to the attention of the head table. There is a guest who is not dressed for the party.

It`s true that he was just invited at the last minute, but so were the other guests gathered here and they seem to have the right attire. Just this one guest chose not to dress for the occasion.

Well, this host is gracious and inclusive right? So does he care that one guest ignores the dress code? Apparently, he does. He cares a lot! – He orders his servants to bind up this sartorially challenged guest and to throw him out "into the outer darkness."

Now imagine being among those attending this party. You have just discovered that this is no casual gathering. It`s not come as you are. There are expectations to live up to. You`d now be minding your manners. You`d want to make sure that you were using the right fork and spoon. That you fold your napkin correctly. You don`t know what the guy at the head table will react to next. Keep your elbows off the table or you may be thrown into darkness.

The parable for the great banquet begins as we might expect, with a gracious and all-embracing invitation being extended. But then comes the surprise. It's not enough to just show up. You have to mind your manners too. Or else there will be wailing and the gnashing of teeth...

No doubt somewhere in the history of the Christian church someone has suggested that this story is about dress codes. Wear your Sunday best. It's not about that.

In First Century Palestine, the simple peasants that heard Jesus words would not have a suit and tie in the closet at home. Dressing a particular way for church, dressing up on Sunday mornings is a practice that is only a century and a half old; it's based on Victorian sensibilities and not on the gospel. Wear jeans and a t shirt to church and no one should bat an eye.

What is this version of parable about, Matthew's story of a celebration that has a darker ending?

Maybe you have seen the Monty Python movie, the life of Brian, and you may remember the scene where people way at the back of the crowd are trying to hear Jesus as he delivers the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus says: "Blessed are the peacemakers" but in the back of the crowd it sounds like "blessed are the cheese makers" and so ensues a discussion about whether this blessing extends to all the providers of dairy products in general. Maybe that's sort of what is going on here with Jesus listeners and this parable

Jesus for three years is speaking about the Kingdom of God. God's kingdom is radically inclusive; it's open to all. But as Jesus speaks he notices that people are discussing his teachings rather casually as if the gospels were a small matter like the movement of interest rates or the likelihood of rain. So Jesus tells this story to remind his listeners that entering the Kingdom of God, participating in it, is the central issue of their lives. It's serious. So hear this story.

Jesus parable is all the more serious as Jesus tells this story between cleansing the Temple, which put him on watch, and his arrest and trial, after Palm Sunday, during Holy Week.

The Kingdom of God, the Shalom of God, the Reign of God's justice and peace in us and between us and in our world, our relationship with the Holy One and God's relationship with the world...this is what is important. We are all invited to the party but let's not be too casual about it.

The message of this parable is echoed in the theology of the German thinker Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer watched as much of the German Christian community acquiesced to the Nazi party and its ways prior to World War 2 and in this time he wrote of cheap grace:

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An

intellectual assent (to an idea). Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Or in the terms of the gospel today- The reign of God is more than idea. More than a casual gathering. You have to fully participate. You have to dress appropriately.

In other places in the New Testament, being clothed correctly is an image of faith- Paul says to the Galatians that being baptised is to “clothe yourself with Christ.” In his letter to the Colossians (Chapter 3) we read: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

I remember reading a while back that maybe the 'wedding robe' that the evicted guest was not wearing in this parable, it is something that would have been provided when the guest arrived at the door. Everyone received a wedding garment. So maybe this one guest chose not to wear it.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote that in each passage of Scripture there is both good news and hard news: law and gospel, comfort and challenge, grace, and judgement.

The Kingdom of God is a great banquet, an epic party and all are invited to come. So come...but...in Matthews version of this story there is an added postscript - he adds some law to the gospel. If you come to Gods party show appreciation. Recognize the gift. Honour the host. Dress for the occasion. Participate fully in the Shalom of Gods Reign. There is nothing more important.