



**10/11/2020 A Feast of Our Own
Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei**

Most if not all of us went through the compilation of a wedding guest list. Some were long and some were more modest. Favorite family members and friends were readily added to the list. Some other people probably got on a “Maybe” list. I wonder how many of us had a “Definitely Not” list. And I also wonder how many of us have had the experience of intruders. I certainly have. The sister of an uncle-in-law showed up invited by her brother unbeknownst to me. That made for an awkward moment, but we did not throw her out.

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a wedding invitation, a banquet, and God’s grace. This is the third parable Jesus uses in occasion of the confrontation in the Temple courtyard with the elders and priests who questioned his authority.¹ In the parable, Jesus teaches about a king who ultimately invites all people to a wedding banquet. At first, the king displays extreme patience when there is no sight of his guests. He sends his servants out to remind the absentee guests that they are invited to his prestigious banquet. One does not ignore a king’s wish, normally. The king himself had hoped to spend this memorable time together with people he had considered honorable and considerate. Besides, their presence might affirm his political status and expand his economic interests.

He is not ready to give up on his social capital and he probably fears a social embarrassment. He goes the extra mile to pursue those who, so far, are not willing to respond. So, he sends his servants out a second time to remind them. He is willing to overlook the fact that they had possibly brushed off the invitation and have rudely ignored him. So now, he almost begs them and appeals to their common sense not to let the rich banquet go to waist.

Once again, those the king wanted to associate himself with show contempt. They reveal their true intentions and character as they turn murderous and arrogantly deny the God-given right to exist to the king’s servants. A series of questions quickly rise one’s mind: “Who do they think they are by choosing unnecessary acts of violence to the point of taking other people’s lives? Is it that in their minds the messengers do not matter simply because they are mere servants? What threshold should one cross and how many loops should one go through to be considered a human being and be treated as such? Are they operating on a human hierarchy scale where some are valued highly, and others are expendable?”

I am sure we do not ascribe less value to anyone on account of race, language, religion, and sexual orientation. But do we consider any of them dispensable or at least not worthy of our time? What if those we consider to be “less than worthy” are, in fact, at one point or another of our life, messengers of God? Are we willing to risk not listening to God and miss out on God’s word of mercy for us? Should we discount them just because they are not, look not, sound not like us?

¹ The first two: the Parable of the Two Sons (Mt. 21:28-32) and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mt. 21:33-46)



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The king of the parable comes to the conclusion that his original guests are not worthy of his benevolence (v. 8). They do not know what they are missing and what precious relationship they are giving up on. Now, the invitation goes out to those “good and evil alike” in the alleyways, in the streets, and on the highways: the marginal people of Israel, those who don’t count, those who don’t pop up in mind as the eligible, the “in” crowd, the sought after. Yet, it is not enough to accept the invitation to the banquet to be declared “worthy.” One must show up with the proper garment. “The parable ends with the warning that admission into God’s banquet is not guarantee of staying there.”² One must decide on a proper response to the invitation.

Jesus tells this parable as a way of teaching us that receiving God’s grace changes lives. Once we receive God’s forgiving love and have a taste of God’s mercy, our lives are never the same. We learn to say a joyous “Yes” to the “Yes” of God to us. This grace compels us to act and calls us to bear fruits of the kingdom with our lives. The “Yes” we say to God is never separated from the “Yes” to neighbor. In fact, we are led to share this grace with others. To continue to live in the same way after receiving this gracious invitation is not an honest response; it means we have not understood the offer. So, what are we to do? We simply repent and find a changing room—it is time to live a new life.

I always feel self-conscious when I go to a changing room in a store: I don’t like the opening at the bottom of the cabin that shows the act of taking my pants down. I have to block any embarrassing thought when I try on new pants.

But this was not my experience when I first put on Christ. When I became aware of God’s mercy towards me and realized how special I was in God’s eyes, I became elated and filled with joy beyond words.

Think of it this way: wouldn’t you be excited and grateful if you were invited to the king’s son’s wedding feast? I mean, we rejoice when we get a wedding invitation in the mail; we are happy for the couple having reached an important milestone in their lives and we want to be there and celebrate with them. But what if we are not just the guests at the wedding party but a betrothed member of the celebrating couple itself? Centuries of Christian spirituality have expressed the attraction of the divine spouse to the soul. Each one of us is called into that intimate relationship, a union of soul and Spirit. The Son’s wedding feast is our feast, too: either we enter the wedding feast full-heartedly or we are found out as cheaters and loafers not wearing the proper garment.

² Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina, p.308)



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Each one of us is a soul God wants to be in profound union with. The love proposition is advanced by God Himself. God pops the question. God is in love with every single one of us:³ our Father is a gracious God, full of mercy and abounding in steadfast love.⁴ The spiritual journey starts with an engagement and then through our acceptance and corresponding love, it hopefully develops into a committed and exclusive marriage with the divine spouse where mutual discovery and mutual transformation is required.⁵

Union with God purifies and divinizes the soul.⁶ God's will for all of us is to have life in spiritual abundance.⁷ In view of that, therefore, God spreads a rich feast of virtues and grace before all of us who cross this bitter valley where death and tears are a common experience. All of us, pilgrims seeking love and meaning, are wanted, sought after, and cherished. God is the One who leads us to rich and verdant pastures.

But there is a catch: *If the Lord is my Shepherd, then I shall not want.*

There is no other god, Yahweh reminds us, and we should bow to no empty idol. Psalm 23 challenges me to consider exactly what I think I need that God cannot provide. In a culture where we value material possessions as a measure of our worth and well-being, we find ourselves at odds. God is the love of our life and the very source of our well-being. Yet, we have learned to regard ourselves as consumers who are constantly in need of something we think we lack. The barrage of messages we are exposed to is that we will be unhappy unless we gather more stuff.

Those who are familiar with the children TV Christian show Veggie Tales will remember the Madame Blueberry episode addressing the theme of greed and offering, as an alternative, both the virtue of self-control and the value of simplicity. The protagonist, Madame Blueberry, goes on a shopping spree at a newly open mega-store. After she wanders from isle to isle with a full cart, she is asked a very pertinent question: "How much stuff do you need?" Her reply: "I don't know. How much is there?"

We constantly fight the temptation to live by the maxim "I have, therefore I am." and race with our neighbor to be the first to acquire the latest gadget or the biggest "whatever." Our possessions have become more important to us than people. Our very existence is threatened when we perceive people want to deprive us of our stuff. Some would go to any extent to protect their stuff, forgetting that in a true union with God we "fear no evil." In fact, God

³ Jeremiah 31:3; 1 John 4:7-21; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4-5

⁴ Psalm 103:8

⁵ God, the Alpha and the Omega, remains the same. It is our understanding and image of God that changes.

⁶ Isaiah 61:10

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:3; Isaiah 55:1; John 10:10; Romans 5:17



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provides and protects even by spreading a table for us before our enemies. You may ask: "How can anyone relax when the enemy is around?" Yet, God's presence is reassuring: God, the Shepherd, has our back. Our head is anointed and blessed.

In a world where our value system is turned upside down, Psalm 23 invites us to savor and enjoy God's gifts: food for body and soul, and a good path in life (verse 3). When God restores my soul, God gives me my life back. That is the meaning of Shalom, total confidence in God's favor. And God favors the poor in spirit, the simplehearted, the generous, and the lover of souls. Am I such a person? Do I walk around with that joy in my heart?

Just as I have been called to the wedding feast where I celebrated my love for the Lord, other people are called to the feast as well. The inviting Church goes through the streets of the world to call people to the feast.

What does it mean in our times to be messengers of the wedding feast?

Well, first of all, it is to their own wedding feast with the Lord we are inviting people to. We reflect on our joy to be united with Him and we let people know it is for real, the banquet is really satisfying, and our fears are removed as we are one in Him. The wedding feast is for them, too. They may have fullness of life as they learn to trust and follow the divine Shepherd to green pastures. They will have their wounds healed and their bruises soothed as they learn to rest in the Lord. They will see their cup overflowing even as their enemies are watching over.

Secondly, they will realize that the Church is serious about loving the Middle Eastern, dark skinned man who was executed on a cross as a rebel by the powerful. The Church is serious about seeing him in those who suffer, you know?

- Those cheated out of their homes by shady loans; or the dispossessed who lost their home and land to gangs and other criminal activities.
- Those who go hungry, whose dignity and health have been stolen along with their jobs.
- Those who must choose between medications and rent.
- The thirsty, whose drinking water has been polluted in the name of progress and economic interests.
- The despised, the addicted, the mentally insane, those locked out and those locked in, the blamed and lied about, those brutalized by the system.

Thirdly, people will hear the invitation to the wedding feast as the Church shows a compassionate presence with those who suffer in the world. The forces of evil are having their field day all around the world cloaked in garments of authority. Divine grace compels us to be



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their companions on the journey, side by side with them, learning from one another, sharing tears and laughter, expertise and resources.

His salvation is at hand for those who fear Him and seek His face. The Lord's lovingkindness will bless the people's faithfulness and wherever there is justice, peace will follow.⁸ May the people of the Earth know peace, may the whole creation of God know justice. Amen.

⁸ See Psalm 85