Sunday, November 4, 1984
R.S.V.P. REGRETS ONLY
Matthew 22:1-14

All of us have received invitations to parties, banquets, weddings and other kinds of festivities. Frequently the invitation will say at the bottom — R.S.V.P. and sometimes will add, “Regrets Only.” In other words, if we don’t hear from you to the contrary, we’ll be expecting you.

Each one of us has our own reasons for accepting some invitations and for turning down others. Sometimes it depends on who it is that is issuing the invitation. Some people are more difficult to turn down than others. I’ve been told that some so-called society people sometimes try to put social climbers down by refusing their invitations. None of us like to have our offer of hospitality rudely refused. The custom of celebrating with others and especially eating with others or refusing to do so has always held deep meaning in human relations.

In our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a story about an individual — a King — who gave a marriage feast for his son and invited all of his friends and associates to the banquet. Whether or not the invitation said, “R.S.V.P. Regrets Only,” we don’t know, but the King received many regrets and excuses.

Worst of all, some of those invited didn’t take the invitation very seriously. So, the giver of the feast invited others — anyone his servants could find in the streets, both bad and good, and the wedding banquet hall was filled with guests.

As is the case with many of the stories Jesus told, he began this one by saying, “The Kingdom of God may be compared to a King who gave a marriage feast for his son....”

What is the meaning of the story?

1. First of all, it is a story about God’s invitation to all of us. The God we worship is the God who invites, which is quite different from giving an order. An invitation requires a response of yes or no — while an order is an order and it must be followed. So, God respects our freedom. God says, “You are invited. You are welcome to come to my feast.” God honors us with an invitation.

The God that Jesus revealed does not say — "You have to do this or you have to do that. God never coerces us. God never forces us to do anything.

2. Secondly, as important as the invitation, is what we are invited to be part of — a feast, a banquet, a celebration. The parable is saying that god’s Kingdom is like a huge banquet. It is filled with joy and celebration, not with remorse and sadness.

Here already are several clues for us in how we are to invite others to experience God’s Kingdom. The job of a disciple of Jesus is to invite and attract and to offer the gospel. We are not to force or coerce others into becoming part of the church, but we are to extend the invitation. Frequently I’m surprised when I visit with someone and I ask them why they never became part of the church and their response is — "No one ever invited me.”

When we invite others as in the parable, let’s be sure we’re inviting them to a place of joy and festivity. We invite others to come to worship here an to experience the joy of being aware of

God's presence and love. We don't say, "You are sinners and you need to be reminded of your sin — so come to our church and we'll show you what sin really is."

"The Kingdom of God is like a huge banquet," said Jesus; "It's an experience of joy and festivity." Then as the guests begin to experience the delight and uplift of becoming more aware of God's presence and love; then they will see how different was the darkness and gloom when they were not aware of God's love and peace.

Repentance and remorse always come soon enough, but joy can never come too soon.

We do not put enough emphasis on the fact that Jesus most frequently described God's Kingdom as being like a fantastic banquet — a time of joy and happiness.

If creation is a blessing, then our proper response is to enjoy it. Pleasure of this kind is one of the deepest spiritual experiences of our lives. Ecstasy is the experience of God. But this kind of pleasure does not always come easily to us when our main emphasis is getting more and more for ourselves, or if we keep emphasizing our own sin and unworthiness.

God's invitation is a call to delight in God's Kingdom — to learn the art of savoring. Creation needs savoring more than it needs inventory-making. To savor is to enjoy something for itself — it is to contemplate, to take pleasure in. To savor something is to appreciate, rather than appraise. Far too often our only question or concern in looking at something is — "What's it worth?"

Unfortunately, to enjoy, to appreciate, to take pleasure in God's Kingdom, God's creation has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives. In fact, it's often been the opposite. Many times in the past, Christians have been asked, "Did you take pleasure in it?" As a test of whether or not an action was a sin in that tradition. To equate pleasure or delight in God's creation as sin is heresy! Furthermore, as W. H. Auden said, "As a rule, it is the pleasure-haters who become unjust."

People on moral crusades are often grim and unsmiling. They are too serious and do not know how to laugh and enjoy God's creation.

God invites us to a banquet — a feast — that's the metaphor which Jesus used most frequently for the Kingdom of God. The glum, sour faces of many Christians are poor proclaimers of that joy which comes from being invited to God's banquet. They rater give the impression that, instead of coming from God's banquet, they have just come from the Sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now they are sorry they can't get them back again.

So, it is that God invites and God invites us to a celebration, a feast — to an experience of joy and delight.

3. But the regrets came in so quickly from those first invited! Why the refusals? Perhaps they thought they had more important things to do. They had a different set of priorities.

So often we get side-tracked in our lives and miss what's more important. The story is told of a Brooklyn Dodger baseball player, an outfielder named "Babe" Herman, who one day in a game while running to catch a flyball had his cap blown off, and as he stopped to pick it up, the ball dropped to the ground, and what ought to have been an easy out became a two-base hit.

Whenever a person misses the main point of any occasions through devotion to some minor detail or inconsequential misfortunate, that person is like a fielder stopping to pick up his cap when he or she ought to be catching the ball.

Those who refused God's invitation to the feast were like the outfielder who stopped to pick up his cap and they missed the most important event in their life.

And perhaps others who sent their regrets were too much in a hurry in their lives to take time out for a party. There are those among us who have an over-developed sense of time urgency. Hurry, hurry, hurry. We struggle to accomplish or achieve more and more things or participate in more and more events in less and less time. We cannot take the time to have a good time because we see it as a waste of time.

This "hurry sickness" is a part of our society and there is good evidence that it contributes to heart disease. Everything needs to be done fast! There are more and more fast food establishments. The word "instant" is used to describe more and more services and products. We equate speed with worth and effectiveness.

Worst of all, it means that we cannot take time out o smell the flowers or enjoy the color of the leaves. As mentioned earlier, savoring takes time. If we're always in a hurry we have difficulty attending celebrations or simply appreciating the world around us. From a religious point of view, it means we cannot take time to experience God and know the joy that comes from it. Those who sent regrets in the story which Jesus told needed to learn the art of doing nothing.

Many people think they are doing nothing when they are merely doing something trivial, such as fiddling at something, or dawdling, or playing solitaire, or worrying about the work they should be doing.

Years ago, Halford Luccock wrote that "One prerequisite for the true enjoyment of doing nothing is that you must have plenty to do." Obviously, if you have nothing to do, there is no fun at all in doing nothing. The true enjoyment of doing nothing can only be had when one is buried under a mountain of duties, either real or imaginary.

Luccock claims that it is a myth that necessity was the mother of invention. Rather he says, "Laziness was the mother of invention." Who invented the wheel? Undoubtedly some lout too lazy to push anything. Sitting under a tree, he saw a stone roll downhill, and got an idea for avoiding work. Who invented the sail? Some lazybones too unenergetic to row a boat.

Clarence Bleicher, when he was President of the DeSoto Division of Chrysler, said, "Whenever we have a tough job at the plant and our experts can't find an easy way to do it, we put one of our laziest men on nit. He'll find an easy way in 48 hours flat. Then we adopt his method."

All of us need to practice the art of doing nothing at times — of course, not all the time. The Psalmist wrote, "Be still and know that I am God." In other words, stop, take time out; don't always be in a hurry. There are some things that cannot be hurried. If you don't stop at time, you may miss some of the most incredible experiences in your life. You might even miss God's invitation to a party.

According to the story, not only did some people offer their regrets because they thought they had more important things to do, or because they were in a hurry; but others reacted with

hostility to the invitation — in fact they seized the servants who delivered the invitation, treated them shamefully and killed them.

People who are always angry and hostile find it impossible to take time out to enjoy life, or other people, or God's creation and thus miss God's Kingdom. And the fact that others can find pleasure in doing nothing, in attending a party, seems to make the hostile, angry people even more that way.

Hostility makes it difficult for those who possess it to either attract or to accept and give pure affection. Hostile people cannot give love or receive love gracefully. Hostility is always a block to experiencing the love and grace of God.

In the near future, I plan to do a complete sermon on the subject — "How to Deal with Hostility."

After all the regrets had been received for whatever reason — the King sent out messengers again — but this time they were instructed to go into the highways and streets and invite all they could find — the good and the bad, honest people and rascals. God carries out the plan no matter how many regrets. God's banquet never is cancelled — when the geniuses fail, God turns to the nobodies.

When the bearers of the good news of the love and grace of God walk out and descent into dogmatic hairsplitting or church politics or become concerned only about themselves, God turns to others and rejoices the freshness of their new-found faith.

So, the KINGDOM OF GOD is like a feast, a banquet, a huge party; and you and everyone else is invited. Nothing is more important than that we should be there. God awaits your R.S.V.P. Amen.