Sunday, October 11, 1987
AFRAID OF JOY?
Matthew 22:1-14

How do you decide whether or not you are going to accept an invitation to a wedding and reception, or to some other kind of dinner party? There are times when it is not a difficult decision to make because you already have something else scheduled, and it's not easy to change.

But there are other reasons which most of us have for accepting or turning down an invitation. It often depends on who it is that has issued the invitation. Some invitations are more difficult to refuse than others. Let's suppose you received an invitation to have dinner with the President of the United States at the White House. No matter what else you had previously scheduled for that evening, you would probably cancel that engagement in order to accept the President's invitation.

On the other hand, I've been told that some so-called society people sometimes try to put down social climbers by refusing their invitations. None of us likes to have our offer of hospitality rudely refused. The practice of celebrating with others and especially eating with others or refusing to do so has always held deep meaning in human relationships. To sit at the same table with someone and eat together has, in every society and culture, symbolized hospitality and equality. But if you make someone eat in the kitchen while you are at the dinner table in the dining room, that is a way of saying that the person in the kitchen is not equal to you.

Having a good time with others, celebrating, and feasting have always gone together. So it is in our scripture reading for this morning. Jesus used a marriage feast as a metaphor for what the Kingdom or the community of God is like. The parable begins, "The Kingdom of God can be compared to a King who gave a marriage feast for his son." To put it in contemporary terms, we could say, "To be in the presence of God with others can be compared to a joyful banquet hosted by the most respected person in the community, to which you have been invited."

This very respected person sent special messengers to invite all his friends. However, those who were invited turned down the invitation. The host couldn't understand their refusal, so he sent other messengers with a second invitation, and this time he even told those invited what a grand party it was going to be. He gave them the menu for a feast in advance. It was going to be a party they would never forget — a party filled with good food, joy, and laughter.

Not only did those invited turn down the second invitation, but, as Jesus said, "They made light of it," and went about doing their own things. "They made light of it." They treated the invitation in a cavalier fashion, as something that was not very important. And some of them even seized the messenger, treated them shamefully, and killed them. If you don't like the message, then kill the messenger. We've done that a lot in our human society.

Now the giver of the feast invited others. He sent other messengers into the streets and told them to invite anyone they could find — bad people, good people — invite them all. And so the banquet hall was filled to overflowing, and the party went on as planned.

What is the meaning of the story for us?

First of all, remember Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God can be compared to a huge joyful banquet,” and it centers around God’s invitation to us. The God we worship is a God who invites, which is quite different from giving an order. God never forces us to come to the party. We are invited, and we can say “Yes” or “No.” It’s up to us.

Second, notice especially that to respond positively to God’s invitation is like going to a huge joyful banquet. It is to be filled with joy and celebration, not remorse and sadness. And the very fact that God invites us to this feast is in itself a great miracle. We are not invited because we have earned the invitation or because we deserve it, but simply because God loves us and wants us there.

Here already are several clues for us in how we are to invite others to experience God’s banquet. The job of a disciple of Jesus is to invite, attract, and offer the good news. We are not to force or coerce others into becoming part of the church, but we are to always be extending 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.”

And when we invite others, as in the parable, let’s remember that we’re inviting them to a place of joy and festivity. We invite others to come to worship with us and to thereby 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.”

In the story as Jesus told it, however, those who were first invited and then invited again rejected the invitation. Why would they do that? And why would some of them even go so far as to kill the messengers who brought the invitation?

It’s easy enough to understand why someone might reject an excessive demand, but why an invitation to a celebration?

I can think of two reasons. First, perhaps they made excuses and rejected the invitation because they thought the party was going to be boring and dull. And some religion is like that.

One religious commentator put it this way: “We Christians often represent our faith rather badly. The glum, sour faces of many Christians, who frequently enough look as if they had gallstones (all those who really have them will excuse me), are poor proclaimers of that wedding joy. They rather give the impression that, instead of coming from God’s joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now are sorry they can’t get them back again.”

We Christians 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, as our faith says it is, 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 on getting more and more for ourselves, or if we keep emphasizing our sin and our unworthiness.

God’s invitation is a call to delight in God’s creation — 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 is to appreciate, to be grateful, rather than to appraise. Far too often, our only question or concern in looking at something is “What’s it worth?” rather than enjoying it for what it is.

Unfortunately, to enjoy, to laugh, to sing, to dance, to take pleasure in God’s creation has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives. In fact, it’s often many times been the opposite. 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 being sinful is heresy. Furthermore, as W. H. Auden has pointed out, “As a rule, it is the pleasure-haters who become unjust.” They don’t enjoy life, and they don’t want anyone else to enjoy it either. People on moral crusades are frequently grim and unsmiling.

So maybe those who were at first invited were afraid it was going to be a dull party made up of overly serious, intense, or rather dull and boring religious people.

However, I think they refused the invitation for the opposite reason — they were afraid of joy. I think they knew deep down within themselves that it was going to be a joyful party with lots of singing and dancing and laughter, and they didn’t have time for that kind of thing. They had serious business to take care of.

There are people in our own time also who are afraid of joy, afraid to let go, afraid to celebrate, afraid to have a good time. They are unhappy with life and want others to be unhappy too. They are convinced that the world is no good, and any time there appears to be any evidence to the contrary, they do their best to avoid it. The old saying is that “Misery loves company.” Misery not only loves company; it demands it. If you’re not having a good time, you don’t want anyone else to have a good time either.

This being afraid of joy might explain why in the story such people not only refused the invitation to the party but reacted with hostility — in fact, they seized the messengers, treated them shamefully, and killed them. They didn’t like the message, so they killed the messengers.

People who are always angry and hostile find it impossible to take time out to enjoy life, enjoy other people, or enjoy God’s creation, and thus they miss God’s Kingdom altogether. And the fact that others can find pleasure in taking time out to attend a party seems to make them more hostile.

When those who are afraid of joy refused the invitation, then according to the parable, the host of the banquet sent the messengers out again. This time they went into the side streets and the alleys and invited the beggars, the outcasts, the good and the bad, the honest people and the rascals to come to the banquet. God holds the party no matter how many people refuse the invitation. God does not eat alone.

What a picture of God’s banquet — there they are, all seated around the table: The beggars and the prostitutes, the nobodies, the forgotten, enjoying God’s party. These people were not afraid of joy. They were glad to be invited.

At the close of this parable of God’s banquet, the story takes a surprising turn. One of the guests got into the worst kind of trouble because he was not wearing a proper wedding garment and was thrown out of the banquet hall.

Most Biblical commentators claim that here the “wedding garment” is used in an allegorical way or as a metaphor. This one person is at the party but is still in a foul mood. He does not have the proper attitude. He has not allowed himself to be clothed with joy — rather, his gloomy presence and complaining spirit is beginning to affect the whole mood of the party. So the host confronts him. And the guest is speechless. “Either put on a proper attitude, change your ways, or be thrown out,” says the host. Do not be afraid of joy.

This morning, as you leave this service of worship and go about your duties, remember that God has invited you to a party, and God continues to invite you. To accept that invitation means that you are not going to be afraid of joy. Leave this place of joy this morning and resolve to be confident and joyful in everything that happens to you today and tomorrow because God has made this entire creation. Say a good word to that colleague who gets on your nerves or that person in your house who annoys you, and do it in the name of God. Remember, the Kingdom of God is like a joyful feast, a banquet. And nothing is more important than that we should accept God’s invitation and be there. Amen.