Sunday, October 13, 1996
INVITATION TO JOY
Matthew 22:1-14

How do you decide whether to accept or decline an invitation to a wedding, reception, or another kind of banquet or dinner party? Sometimes it's a difficult decision because of a conflict on the calendar, and then you have to make a choice.

If there's no calendar conflict, there may be other reasons for accepting or turning down the invitation. It might depend on who has issued it. Some invitations are more difficult to refuse than others. For example, if your boss invites you to dinner or to her son's wedding, you might feel obligated to accept. Or, if you received an invitation to dine at the Governor's Mansion or the White House, you would likely clear your schedule to attend.

On the other hand, I've been told that some so-called society people sometimes put down social climbers by refusing their invitations. None of us likes to have our offer of hospitality refused for no good reason.

Celebrating and, especially, eating with others — or refusing to — has always held deep meaning in human relationships. To sit at the same table and eat together symbolizes hospitality, acceptance, and equality in every culture. But if you make someone eat in the kitchen while you dine in the dining room, that is a way of saying that person is not equal to you.

Having a good time with others, celebrating, and feasting have always been an important part of building human relationships.

So, it should not surprise us that Jesus used a marriage feast as a metaphor for what being part of God's community is like. He said, "Being a part of God's community can be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son." Another way of saying it is, "To be in the presence of God with others is like being a guest at a joyful banquet to which you have been invited by the most respected person in the community."

This highly respected individual went to the trouble of sending special messengers to personally invite the guests. However, those who were first invited turned down the invitation. The host couldn't understand their refusal, so he sent other messengers with a second invitation. This time, he even told the invited guests what a grand party it was going to be. He gave them the menu for the banquet. It was going to be an event they would never forget, filled with good food, joy, and laughter.

Not only did those invited turn down the second personal invitation, but they also made fun of it. Some even seized the messengers, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

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

What's the meaning of the story for us?

First, Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God can be compared to a huge joyful banquet, and it centers around God’s invitation to us.” The one true living God is a God who invites us, which is very 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, responding positively to God’s invitation is like attending a joyful banquet, filled with happiness and celebration, not remorse and sadness. The fact that God invites us to this feast is in itself a miracle. We are invited not because we’ve earned it or deserve it, but because God loves us and wants us there.

In the story as Jesus told it, those who were first invited and then invited again rejected both invitations. Why would they do that? Some of them even killed the messengers who brought the invitation.

It’s not difficult to understand why someone would turn down an invitation to an event that was going to be depressing, but why reject an invitation to joy?

I can think of two reasons. First, perhaps those initially invited thought the party was going to be boring and dull. Remember, Jesus is using the banquet as a metaphor for being part of God’s community. Some religion is dull and boring. Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say that a lot of people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable.

Someone else said, “We Christians often represent our faith rather badly. The glum, sour faces of many Christians, who frequently look as if they have a bad case of indigestion, are poor proclaimers of that wedding joy. They give the impression that, instead of coming from God’s joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who auctioned off their sins, and now they’re sorry they can’t get them back.”

Another person put it this way: “Too often we Christians give the impression that God’s presence is about as welcome as a state trooper when you’re doing 85 miles an hour on the interstate. The Bible becomes a heavenly rendition of ‘Rules for the Road,’ and the church a traffic court where guilty offenders gather to be sentenced and pay their fines.”

We Christians do not put enough emphasis on the fact that Jesus most frequently described being part of God’s community, and having God as an active force in your life, as a fantastic banquet — a life filled with joy and happiness.

Christians should be the most joyful people on earth, and that means enjoying life and God here and now, every minute, every hour, every day.

Nowhere did Jesus say, “I have come to bring you gloom and darkness. I have come to make you feel guilty all the time. I have come to make your life miserable.” Nowhere in the Bible is it said or implied that religion should be a burden. Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” In another place, he said, “Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” And, “Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Unfortunately, enjoying life, laughing, singing, and taking pleasure in God’s creation has not always been suggested as essential to our spiritual lives. In fact, it’s often been the opposite. Christians have been asked, “Did you take pleasure in it?” as a test of whether an action was

sinful, implying that anything bringing us pleasure must be sinful. W.H. Auden wrote, “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 initially invited were afraid it was going to be a dull party made up of overly serious, intense, or rather boring religious people.

In the second place, it’s also possible they refused the invitation for the opposite reason — they were afraid of joy, afraid of choosing happiness. Maybe they knew it was going to be a joyful party with lots of singing, 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 who are afraid of joy, who refuse to choose happiness. They are unhappy with life and want others to be unhappy too. They are convinced the world is no good, and anytime there appears to be 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 fear of joy explains why, in the story, some not only refused the invitation to the banquet, but reacted with hostility — they seized the messengers 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 find joy in life. They do not enjoy others being happy. They do not enjoy God’s creation, and thus they miss God’s purpose for them altogether. The fact that others can choose happiness makes them all the more resentful.

God keeps inviting us anyway. And if we won’t accept the invitation, God will keep inviting others until there are those who do accept. In the story, when those afraid of joy refused the invitation, the host sent more messengers, who went into the side streets and alleys and invited the beggars, the outcasts, the good and the bad, the honest and the rascals to the party. God holds the party, no matter how many people turn down the invitation.

What a picture of God’s community, God’s banquet. There they are, all seated around the table: the beggars, the prostitutes, the nobodies, the forgotten, all enjoying God’s party. These people were not afraid of joy.

Near the end of this story, it takes a surprising turn. One of the guests, who accepted the invitation, 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 allegorically, as a metaphor. This one person is at the party but remains in a foul mood. He doesn’t choose happiness. He hasn’t allowed himself to be clothed with joy. His gloomy, depressing presence and complaining spirit begin 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.

In a remarkable book entitled Happiness is a Choice, the author, Barry Neil Kaufman, tells of a conversation he had with another parent. Kaufman and his wife had a child who, at birth, was found to be neurologically impaired. He and his wife later wrote a book about the uplifting journey their family took to heal their special child. One day, Kaufman spoke with a man who

had written quite a different story. The man documented what he experienced as the difficult and damning reality of parenting a “less-than-perfect” youngster. He declared without apology to Kaufman that he hated people like him. He said to Kaufman, “You take something that’s terrible and make believe it’s beautiful.” Kaufman considered his point of view for a moment and then said softly, “Did you ever consider that you might be taking something that’s beautiful and making it terrible?”

At that moment, Kaufman said, “I realized that neither one of us held the truth, only a vision we had each created and then used to embrace our situation. I had decided to see my son and his difficulties as an opportunity to grow, learn, and love. He regarded his situation as a curse. Our different experiences had followed from those distinctly different visions.”

Today, as you leave this service of worship and go about your duties, remember that God has issued you an invitation to joy. You can accept or turn it down. If you accept God’s invitation, then you are choosing happiness. It means you are not going to be afraid of joy.

Choir members, as you walk down the aisle, smile so that the congregation will smile in return. Through your singing and leadership in our worship, you have increased our joy.

Members of the congregation, as you leave, resolve to be confident and joyful in everything that happens to you today and tomorrow because God made you and others and this entire creation, and God created it good. 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, being a part of God’s community is like a joyful feast, a banquet. And nothing is more important than accepting God’s invitation to joy. Amen.