Sunday, October 13, 2002
RSVP
Matthew 22:1-14

Most people, when receiving an invitation to a special event, have two decisions to make: first, will you accept the invitation or decline? Second, if in your RSVP you accept the invitation, what will you wear? If you're in high school or college and receive an invitation to the homecoming dance or the prom, and you accept, then for many young people, it's time to go shopping.

Sometimes the invitation will suggest the dress code, such as formal or informal. If it's a pre-game football party, the invitation might suggest "game attire." If you are on a cruise ship, most of them will let you know the suggested mode of dress for the evening meal in the main dining room. One night it could be "formal," another night "elegantly casual," and another time "informal."

However, the first decision when you receive an invitation is whether or not you are going to accept it. How do you decide? Maybe there's a conflict on your calendar. You've already been invited to another event and have accepted. Or perhaps you've had too many nights out recently and would rather stay home. Is it going to be a party where you are certain to have fun? Do you like the other people who have been invited?

Some invitations are more difficult to refuse than others unless you have a very good excuse. Your boss has invited you to the wedding of her daughter. You might feel obligated to accept, especially since she came to the wedding of your daughter when invited. If you've received an invitation to have dinner at the Governor's Mansion or at the White House, then, too, you probably would clear your schedule so that you could attend.

On the other hand, I've been told that some snobbish people try to put down people they consider "social climbers" by refusing their invitations.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, celebrating — especially eating with others or refusing to do so — has always held deep meaning in human relationships. To be invited to a party, to sit at the table with someone and eat together, has in every culture symbolized hospitality, acceptance, 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 played an important part in building and maintaining human relationships.

That's why I noted in last week's sermon that Jesus frequently used a banquet or big party as a metaphor for what it means to be a part of God's community. In the scripture reading for today, he said, "Receiving an invitation to be a part of God's community can be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son." Another way of translating it is, "To be in the presence of God with others is like being invited by the most respected member of your community to be his guest at a joyful banquet."

According to the parable, this highly regarded individual went to the trouble to send special messengers to personally invite the guests. However, those who were the first to be invited turned down the invitation. The host couldn't understand their refusal, so he sent other messengers with a second invitation. This time his messengers were instructed to tell those

who were invited what a grand party it was going to be. He even gave them the menu for the banquet. It was going to be a celebration they would never forget — a party filled with good food, joy, and laughter.

Not only did those who were invited turn down the second personal invitation, but they also made fun of it. Some of them went so far as to seize the messengers, treat them shamefully, and kill them. What an insult to the sponsor of the party! Instead of a polite regret, they punished the messengers and even killed some of them.

Now the host of the feast invited others. The party was going to be held anyway. This time he sent messengers into the streets and told them to invite anyone they could find — bad people, good people, bums, beggars, invite them all. The banquet hall was filled to overflowing, and the party went on as planned.

Then something unexpected took place at the wedding celebration. As the host moved among his guests, he noticed a man who was not dressed properly for a wedding reception. The guest did not say that he had rushed over directly from the office or that he had no tuxedo or that there was no time to change. He had no excuse, which must have meant that he did not consider the occasion important enough to put on the proper clothing. The host said to this person, “Friend, how did you get in here without following the dress code?” The guest had no excuse, so the host had him thrown out.

What’s the meaning of this story for us? First of all, remember the story is filled with metaphors. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God can be compared to a huge joyful banquet.” It centers around God’s invitation to you and me. A little later in this sermon, we’ll look more closely at why the guest who was not wearing the proper clothing was asked to leave the party.

Jesus wants you to know that God is continually inviting you to be in God’s presence, which is like being at a wonderful party. It is filled with happiness and celebration, not dull and boring. You are invited, not because you’ve earned the invitation or deserve it, but because God loves you and wants you there. You can say, “yes” or “no” to the invitation.

But if it’s such a joyful, fun occasion, why would some people turn it down? You can understand why someone might decline an invitation to an event that was going to be depressing, but why refuse an invitation to a celebration?

I can think of two reasons. Maybe those who were initially invited rejected the invitation because they thought the party was going to be boring and dull. Remember, Jesus is using the banquet as a metaphor for being a part of God’s community. Some religion is boring and dull. There are even those who think the purpose of religion is to put a damper on having fun. To smile or laugh in church, for them, is considered improper. Harry Emerson Fosdick said that a lot of people have just enough religion to make them miserable.

We Christians do not put enough emphasis on the fact that Jesus most frequently described God’s community as being like a fantastic banquet, a time of joy and happiness. Your religious faith should add enchantment to your life. You should feel better when you leave a worship service than when you came in. 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.

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 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.” He also said, “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

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. Ecstasy is the experience of God’s presence. But this kind of pleasure does not come easily if your main emphasis is getting more and more for yourself, or if you keep emphasizing your sin and unworthiness.

Unfortunately, to enjoy, to laugh, sing, and dance, to take pleasure in God’s creation, has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives. Too often, it’s been the opposite. You could be asked by some overly religious person, “Did you take pleasure in it?” as a test of whether or not an activity was a sin. People on moral crusades can be grim and unsmiling.

So maybe those who were at first invited were afraid the wedding celebration was going to be filled with dull and boring religious people whose main emphasis was going to be to convince you what an awful sinner you are.

It’s also possible that those who refused the invitation to the party did so for the opposite reason — they were afraid of joy. They knew it was going to be a delightful party with lots of dancing and laughter, and they didn’t have time for that kind of activity. They had serious business to take care of. The story says, “They made light of the invitation and went away, one to his farm and another to his business.”

There are people who think celebrating and having fun is a waste of time. There is money to be made, and that’s serious business. They don’t want other people having a good time either. They are unhappy with life and want others to join them in their unhappiness. 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. This could explain why, in the story, such people not only refused the invitation but reacted with hostility. They treated the messengers badly and even killed some of them.

But God’s party is held anyway. The host now sent his messengers to invite everyone, the good and the bad. What a picture of God’s community! There they are, all seated around the table — beggars, prostitutes, the nobodies, the forgotten — all enjoying God’s banquet. They are not afraid of joy.

But what about this poor fellow who didn’t follow the dress code and was thrown out? Remember, this is a parable, and you need to understand the term “wedding garment” as a metaphor. This individual is at a party but still in a foul mood. He has not allowed himself to be clothed with joy. His gloomy, depressing presence and complaining spirit are affecting the whole atmosphere of the celebration. The host confronts him, and the guest is speechless. “Either put on a proper attitude or be thrown out,” the host tells him. Nobody wants a sourpuss at a party for very long.

Clothing is a good metaphor. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Throughout the Bible, clothing is not merely outerwear, but symbolizes attitudes.

In this story, Jesus is reminding you and me that there are all kinds of improper clothing that can keep you from experiencing the joy of God’s presence, God’s banquet. Here’s my short list of the wrong kind of clothing for truly enjoying God’s presence, which includes the company of others. You are not wearing the proper clothing when you dress yourself in self-righteousness, which includes arrogance. You cannot truly appreciate God’s love and the love of others when you are wearing the clothing of envy or jealousy. Envy never meets the dress code for any kind of party or relationship.

You cannot enjoy God’s banquet or the company of others when you are wearing the clothing of hate.

It’s a good question to ask yourself each morning as you get dressed: what kind of clothes will you wear today? Are you going to be clothed in the worries of the world? Are you going to put on the dress or trousers or shirt or blouse of guilt, anger, despair, or greed?

God invites you today and every day to God’s banquet. Therefore, put a smile on your face and wear the clothing of love, gratitude, joy, and happiness. Amen.