Sunday, October 9, 2005
AFRAID OF JOY
Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus told this parable to the religious leaders of his day: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.”

I don’t know about you, but if the king invited me to come to a wedding banquet for his son, I would accept the invitation and show up on time. Even if you did not want to attend, it’s not very smart to decline an invitation from the king. In this country, there is no king, so think of it this way: The boss where you work, the governor, or the president of the United States invites you to a wedding banquet for his son. If you have any common sense, you will accept the invitation unless you have a valid excuse.

This king was persistent. When those he had invited did not show up, he sent other slaves to them with the message: “The dinner is prepared. Everything is ready.” Some of the potential guests did not take this second invitation seriously. They ignored it and went about their business. Others seized the messengers, mistreated them, and killed them.

Now the king was angry. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he sent other messengers to invite anyone they could find to come to the party, the good and the bad. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

As the king circulated among his guests, he noticed a man who was not properly dressed for a wedding banquet. He asked him, “How did you get in here without the proper wedding garments? Certainly, you knew the dress code.” The improperly attired guest was speechless. He had no good excuse. He did not say that he had rushed over to the party directly from work and there was no time to change, or that he did not have the money to buy the proper clothes. So the king had the improperly dressed guest evicted.

I’ve been invited to many wedding receptions, but none of them had this much violence before the reception or during the party. I think all of you would admit that there are parts of this story that do not sound like Jesus. He was not what you might call a “stuffed shirt.” He never took formalities as seriously as the religious authorities of his day.

But remember, it’s a parable, a story, a metaphor. It should not surprise you that Jesus used a marriage banquet as a metaphor for participating in God’s community. As I mentioned in last week’s sermon, celebrating and especially eating together, or refusing to do so, has always held deep meaning in human relationships. To be invited to a party, to sit at the table and eat together, has in every culture symbolized hospitality, acceptance, and equality.

But if you make one of your guests eat in the kitchen while you are at the dinner table in the dining room with other guests, that is a way of saying that the person in the kitchen is not equal to you. Having a good time, celebrating, and feasting have always played an important part in building and maintaining human relationships.

That’s why I also mentioned in last week’s sermon that Jesus frequently used a banquet or a big party as a metaphor for what it means to experience God’s presence and to be a part of God’s community. Therefore, one of the first points Jesus is making in this story of the king’s

marriage banquet is that receiving an invitation to be a part of God's community can be compared to a king who gave a marriage banquet for his son. Here's another way of saying it: "To be in the presence of God with other people is like being invited by the most respected member of your community to be a guest at a joyful banquet."

Note especially in the story, God invites you, which is different from giving an order to force you to attend. Even though the guests ignored the first invitation, God continues to send messengers to invite you. You are not invited because you've earned it or because you 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 you turn down the invitation? You can understand why someone would refuse an invitation to a depressing event. I can think of at least two reasons why someone, hopefully not any of you, would turn down an invitation to a banquet.

First, maybe those who were initially invited ignored 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 people are convinced that religion is boring and dull. Others think religion should be boring and dull. Don't ever laugh or even smile in church. Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say 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 described God's community as being like a fantastic banquet, a place of joy and happiness. Your religious faith should add enchantment and fun to your life.

If creation is a blessing, as your faith says it is, then your proper response is to enjoy it. Pleasure of this type is one of the deepest spiritual experiences. Ecstasy is the experience of the Holy. But this kind of pleasure does not come easily if your main purpose in life is getting more and more stuff for yourself, or if you keep emphasizing your sin and unworthiness. That's why you've heard me say over and over again that when you leave one of our worship services, our goal is that you will feel better than when you came in.

God's invitation is a call to delight in God's creation, to savor it. To savor is to enjoy something for itself. It is to appreciate, to be grateful rather than to appraise. Far too often the only question is, "What's it worth?" or "What does it cost?" rather than enjoying it for what it is.

To enjoy, to laugh, to sing, to dance, to take pleasure in God's creation and in our relationships with one another, has not always been suggested as an essential part of our spiritual lives. Too many times it's been the opposite. You are asked by some overly religious person, "Did you take pleasure in it?" as a test of whether or not an action was a sin. People on moral crusades are frequently grim and unsmiling.

So maybe those who were at first invited to the party were afraid it was going to be a dull affair, made up of boring and overly serious religious people. It's also likely that some of them refused the invitation for the opposite reason — they were afraid of joy. Deep down within themselves, they knew it was going to be a joyful party with plenty of singing, eating, dancing, and laughing, and they didn't have time for those things. The story says, "They didn't take the invitation seriously and went away, one to his farm, another to his business."

There are people even today who are afraid of joy, hesitant to celebrate and have a good time. They are unhappy with life and want others to be the same. They are convinced 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, “Misery loves company.” Misery not only loves company, it demands it. If you aren’t 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. They seized the messengers, treated them shamefully, and killed them. It happens all the time. If you don’t like the message, kill the messenger.

But in the story Jesus told, God’s party is held anyway. The king now sent new messengers to invite everyone, the good and the bad. God holds the party no matter how many refuse the invitation.

What an astounding picture of God’s community. There they are all seated around the table — the beggars, the nobodies, the homeless, the forgotten, the rich and the poor — all enjoying God’s banquet. They are not afraid of joy.

But what about this poor fellow who didn’t have the proper wedding attire and was thrown out? That doesn’t sound fair. Remember, however, this is a parable, and most Biblical scholars point out that the term “wedding robe” is a metaphor. In many other places in the Bible, clothing is used as a metaphor. Paul wrote, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Clothing is more than outerwear; it also symbolizes attitudes.

This person is at the party but still in a foul mood. He has not allowed himself to be clothed with joy. His gloomy, depressing presence is beginning to affect the whole atmosphere of the party. The host confronts him, and this guest is speechless. “Either put on a proper attitude or be thrown out,” he tells the man. Nobody wants a sourpuss at a party for very long.

What the parable is teaching is that there are types of “improper dress” that can keep you from experiencing the joy of God’s presence, God’s party. Here’s my short list of the wrong kind of clothes.

It’s difficult to enjoy and appreciate God’s presence and the company of others when you wear the coat of self-righteousness and arrogance.

My parents, grandparents, and their ancestors never had the privilege nor opportunity of going to college. My brother, my four sisters, and I were the first generation to go beyond high school. I can remember when I came home now and then, I all too often wanted to show off my sophomoric wisdom to my dad. That coat of arrogance created by a little knowledge had to be taken off if I wanted to be in a good relationship with him and the rest of the family. Looking back, I am surprised that my parents were as patient with me as they were. The arrogance and self-righteousness created by a little knowledge is a coat worn by too many people.

Another kind of improper dress that can keep you from enjoying God’s banquet is the wearing of the coat of not being open to new truth because you are already sure you know it all. This coat has as one of its accessories, prejudice. For example, in the realm of the Christian faith,

we now know so much more about how the Bible came to be what it is, and yet there are people who are unwilling to consider any new possibilities.

The coat of not being open to consider new truth is worn by people in every field of knowledge. This past week it was announced that the Nobel Prize for Medicine will be awarded to two researchers from Australia, Barry Marshall and Robin Warren, who discovered in 1982 that peptic stomach ulcer disease is caused by a specific kind of bacteria. When this was first demonstrated some years ago, many medical people, including drug companies, refused to consider bacteria as a cause. The findings eventually forced drug firms and physicians to rethink the treatment of a condition that affects millions of people and saves billions of dollars.

One more kind of improper dress that can keep you from participating with joy in God's banquet is the coat of envy. Envy is always unwelcome clothing. It never meets the dress code of any kind of party and especially a celebration to which you have been invited by God.

Related to the dress of envy is the clothing of hatred of another person or group. I see so many people today wearing the dress of hate. You cannot enjoy God's presence when you are hating another person. The letter of 1 John in the New Testament says it bluntly: "Anyone who says he or she loves God and hates another person is a liar." You've heard the old saying, "Clothes can make the person." That's especially true in the kind of attitude clothing you wear.

Here's a good question to ask yourself each day: "What kind of clothes am I going to wear today? Am I going to be clothed in the worries of the world? Am I going to put on the dress or coat or shirt or trousers of self-righteousness? Am I going to get dressed up in the attire of not being open to new truth? Am I going to wear the clothing of envy or hate?"

You are invited every day to the joy of God's banquet. Are you afraid of joy? Put a smile on your face and dress up in the clothing of gratitude, generosity, cheerfulness, and love. Amen.