

## As Groucho Marx Once Said....

[Text - Matthew 22:1-14]

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Today's New Testament reading begins on a cheerful and upbeat note! Jesus says, "The Realm of God may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call all those who had been invited, to come to the banquet!" Beautiful! A gracious invitation to a joyous event, and a thoughtful follow-up. But for some reason, everything suddenly goes wrong. Those who have been invited, say that they're not going to come! So the king sends others servants, to implore them to attend. And then...the real trouble begins. Feeble excuses are made; servants are mistreated, some are even *killed*. So the king sends troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city to the ground. All this terrible trauma and drama, over an invitation to a wedding banquet. [It makes *eloping* sound like not such a bad idea!]

Of course, all this fussing and fighting isn't about an invitation to a wedding banquet - it's about the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm. The Hebrew people, throughout their collective history, have felt that they are called to be active participants in God's redemptive work in this world. Unfortunately, some of them figure that this invitation to participate means that they are somehow morally superior to other people, and more beloved by God. Even within their own nation, certain individuals and groups feel that they are holier than that others; and that they can treat those "less-than-holy" others as being less-important to God. However, whenever people *are* mistreated or oppressed, the Holy One raises-up prophets to proclaim the Divine Call for compassion and justice. And like the servants in Jesus' parable, many of those prophets are also mistreated, and some even put to death; yet God's gracious invitation will not be stopped.

In Jesus' day, there's an extremely sharp division between Israel's religious leadership and the "common" people. The intricate interpretations of Hebrew Law had become so complex that many

people simply relinquish anything “religious” to the so-called “experts”. Yet many of those religious experts are so wrapped-up in their rigid rules and rituals, that they have little time or desire to help the poor and the oppressed - which supposedly is what their religion is all about! Even worse, these leaders don’t just ignore people in need, they also dismiss them as being unfit for the Divine Realm. They figure, “If you’re poor, or sick, or downtrodden, then God really must not care for you - certainly not like God cares for us righteous [and richer] individuals!” And because these pious people see themselves as having an exclusive, inside invitation to the Divine Realm, Jesus tells this parable to drive home two critically important points: First, that *everyone* is invited to participate and celebrate within the Divine Realm. And secondly, that the only ones who can be excluded from that Holy Realm, are those who would exclude themselves.

A king sends a special invitation to people who he believes would *want* to come to the wedding feast - to all those who have any connection to the royal family Yet many of those who have that connection - who hold in their hands that personal invitation - chose to not join in the celebration. They “make light of it and go on their way.” They have their own business to attend, which in their minds supersedes their relationship to the king. Many of them even turn on the royal messengers, mistreat them, and kill them! Now that’s a terribly harsh response to a gracious and generous invitation! Yet it’s not the invitation per se that’s problematic; it’s the idea that the king would extend such an **expansive** invitation. It’s that those who think they have this unique, inside connection, stubbornly resist the idea of including anyone else! So Jesus tells this parable to let those religious “insiders” know - that regardless of their rejection - the invitation continues to go-forth. In fact, it extends to the poor, the sick and the lowly - even to those who are viewed as “morally inferior outsiders!”

Throughout his ministry, Jesus passionately proclaims that the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm is for all people, whoever and wherever they may be! He also reveals, that the only people who **can** be excluded, are those who exclude themselves - by categorically rejecting the invitation, and stubbornly refusing to be part of such an

expansive, eclectic, and celebratory community. His parable gives us a picture of how this self-exclusion might happen.

In First Century Israel, when guests arrive at a wedding banquet, they're all given the opportunity to freshen-up from their dusty journey, and to put on a special wedding robe which the host provides. This is why the king can immediately spot that one person who is *not* dressed for the occasion. For this magnificent celebration, everything's been provided by the host: the food, the drink, the music, the venue, even a festive robe to wear. Yet one of those guests makes a deliberate choice to not put on that robe, and get into the festive spirit.

Now maybe it's because the robe is a bit too tight at the hips. [Some of us can be rather fussy when it comes to our festive robes.] Or perhaps it just wasn't his color or style. More likely, this man refuses because the other *guests* just aren't his color; or he doesn't approve of their gay and open lifestyle. Maybe he *himself* is too tight - too inflexible to associate with those undesirable street people who are now present. Perhaps he simply can't stand the idea of dressing like those pathetic poor and sick and sinful people around him. Groucho Marx once joked, "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member!" But this man isn't joking, in his refusal to associate with those "inferior", diverse people around him. None-the-less, the king still gives him a chance to make amends, saying, "*Friend...how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*" But the man says absolutely nothing! Had he asked forgiveness for his condescending attitude and stubborn pride, his story could have a magnificent ending. But the fact that he doesn't even respond to the king's gracious invitation to redeem the situation, shows that he really doesn't want to be part of this diverse and inclusive celebration; so he is unceremoniously ejected "into the outer darkness".

Every now and then, when people learn that I'm a pastor [once they stop laughing], they'll engage me in deep theological discussions. One question that people who have a particularly hard time with religion sometimes pose, is this: "How can this God of overwhelming love that you take about, ever condemn *anyone* to a place of eternal darkness

and torment?” I let them know that I, too, have a hard time with religion; but my understanding, from following the life of Jesus, is that *God* doesn't do this! It seems more likely to me, that it's those deliberate choices people make - day after day, year after year - that eventually closes their minds, hardens their hearts, and eradicates any desire to even associate with those “unacceptable” people who they have spent a lifetime learning to fear and hate. So they become immovably resolute in their position: “If Gods' going to let those kind of people in, then count me out!”

I believe the that invitation to connect within the Divine Realm is extended to *everyone*; so the only ones who can be excluded, are those who exclude themselves. And whether or not this practice of stubbornly separating ourselves from all those people we don't like, is permanently projected into eternity, is really beside the point. *Today* is the day you and I decide that we will not exclude others, because they're different from us. In that very *moment* we see another person being persecuted because of how they look, or talk, or believe - is the moment we choose to speak-out and take action on their behalf. *Whenever* an opportunity arises for us to warmly welcome others to join in the celebration of Divine Life and Love, is precisely the moment when you and I can make it happen!

Like the king's servants, you and I can “go out to the streets and invite anyone we encounter...so that the banquet hall may be filled.” The chance and the choice to do so, is in the here-and-now. I don't know the eternal ramifications of what we do, or don't do. What I do know, is that Jesus Christ presents you and me a magnificent Story about invitation, inclusion, acceptance, and Divine Grace; and that you and I have the awesome privilege of moving that story forward toward its glorious future! And if we're really concerned about “Eternity”, we'll remember that each present moment is the only point in Eternity in which you and I actually live. So, let's do our best to make the most of it!