

**On a Happier Note....**  
[Text - Matthew 22:1-13]

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Today's New Testament Reading - like today's worship service - begins on a positive and upbeat note. Jesus says, "The Divine Realm 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 call. But then, like an off-key note from a trumpet player watching someone sucking on a lemon, everything turns sour. Those who have been invited, say they're not going to come! So the king sends others servants, to implore them to attend. And then, the real trouble begins. Flimsy excuses are made, servants are mistreated, and some are even *killed*. So the king sends troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city to the ground![Wow! Maybe those two lovebirds should have just eloped!]

Of course, this story isn't about an invitation to a wedding banquet - it's about the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm. The people of Israel, throughout their history, have believed that they are called to be active participants in the Holy One's work in this world. Unfortunately, some of them think that this invitation to participate means that they are somehow morally superior to others, and that the Holy One loves *them* more than those "others"! Even within their own society, certain individuals and groups believe that they are more righteous than others; and that they can treat those unrighteous *others* as being less-important to the Holy One. Fortunately, throughout their history, whenever people are being mistreated or oppressed, the Holy One raises-up *prophets* - people who re-claim and proclaim the Divine Call for compassion, equality and justice. Yet like the servants in Jesus' parable, many of those prophets are also mistreated, and some of them are even killed. Nevertheless the Holy One's gracious invitation will not be stopped.

By the time of Jesus, many of the religious leaders in Israel have abandoned the Divine Call to *be* a prophet, and are more interested in *making* a profit - by selling animals for sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple, or by charging people extra to exchange their currency in order to pay the so-called Temple Tax. These leaders are so caught-up in their self-serving and [often] lucrative rules and rituals, that they have little time or desire to help the poor and hurting, the struggling and oppressed - which supposedly is what their religion is all about! Even worse, these leaders don't just ignore people in need, they often dismiss them as being unfit for the Divine Realm.

Like some of today's "Prosperity Preachers", they contend that, "If you are poor, or sick, or downtrodden, then God must not really care for you - certainly not as much as God cares for us righteous and more prosperous people!" So Jesus tells this parable to drive home two critically important points to those who see themselves as having an exclusive, inside invitation to the Divine Realm. The first point is that *everyone* is invited to participate and celebrate in the Divine Realm. And the second is, that the only ones who can be excluded from that Divine Realm, are those who would exclude themselves.

The king sends a personal invitation to those people he hopes will *want* to come to the wedding banquet; yet many of them choose 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 long-standing relationship with the royal family. Many of them even turn against the king’s messengers, mistreat them, and kill them! And in addition to that horrible response, those who think that they have this special relationship, stubbornly resist the idea of anyone else being invited or included! So Jesus tells this parable to let the religious “insiders” know - that regardless of their rejection - the invitation continues to go-forth. In fact, it is specifically extended to the poor, the sick, the lowly, and to those who are viewed as being “morally inferior *outsiders!*”

Throughout his ministry, Jesus passionately proclaims that the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm is for *all* people! He also reveals, that the only people who *can* be excluded, are those who exclude themselves - by categorically rejecting the invitation, and by stubbornly refusing to be part of an expansive, diverse, and joyful community. Jesus’ parable gives us a picture of how this kind of self-exclusion might happen. In First Century Israel, when guests arrive at a wedding banquet, they’re given the opportunity to freshen-up and to put on a special wedding robe which the host provides. This explains how those poor, last-minute invitees can be nicely dressed; and why the king can immediately spot that one person who is *not* dressed for the occasion. Apparently this individual can’t stand the idea of dressing like all those “lowly, inferior and unrighteous people” around him.

Yet in spite of this man’s refusal to associate with those “lowlife, inferior *others*”, the king still gives him a chance to make amends. He says to him “Friend...*friend*, what are you doing here without a wedding robe?” But the man says *nothing!* Had he asked forgiveness for his condescending attitude and stubborn pride, his story could have ended on a much happier note. But the fact that he doesn’t even respond to the king’s gracious attempt 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”.

Some people rightly wonder, “How can a God of overwhelming love, ever condemn *anyone* to a place of eternal darkness and misery?” According to Jesus, *God doesn’t!* Rather, it’s those deliberate choices that people make - day after day, year after year - that eventually closes their minds, hardens their hearts, and eradicates any desire to ever associate with those “unacceptable *others*” - people who they have spent a lifetime learning to devalue and dehumanize, fear and hate. They become immovable in their position, saying essentially “If God is going to let *those* kind of people in, then count me out! I’d rather suffer in my own dark delusion, than to acknowledge the intrinsic value of those *others*, or to admit that I was *wrong.*”

Now, whether this practice of stubbornly separating ourselves from all those people we don’t like, is permanently projected into Eternity, is beside the point. *Today* is the day you and I must decide that we will not exclude others, because they’re different from us. *Anytime* we see people being oppressed or abused because of their race or religion,

gender, sexual orientation or social status - that is the moment we must speak-out and take action on their behalf. *Whenever* the opportunity arises for you and me to graciously welcome others to join in the celebration of Divine Life and Love, that is the perfect time for you and me to do so! And if we're really concerned about "Eternity", then we'll remember that the Present Moment is the only point in Eternity in which you and I actually live, and can make a difference. The past is past; the future is yet to be determined. So let's make the most - and the best - of the here and now. Let us warmly welcome *all* people to join us in celebrating Life's Beautiful Banquet, and in sharing the Overflowing Divine Love which is intended for us all!