

A rewriting of The King's Wedding Banquet — Grace Included (Mt. 22:1-14)

A rewrite of the parable of the King's wedding banquet by Rev. Lisa Cressman.

Jesus told a parable to the chief priests and Scribes.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a noonday wedding banquet that the king threw for his son. As we all know, when the king throws a party it's always a glorious and festive event, and that his deepest wish is that everyone invited, attends — and that it's just stupid not to come and have a great time, especially because it's free!

"The king was especially excited about this party. I mean, it was for his son's wedding! Come on! He was so excited that he sent his servants out to issue personal invitations on the king's behalf. When each received the invitation, however, they grilled the servants. 'How much will it cost? What will I owe the king later on? What do I have to give in return?' When the servants answered 'Nothing, nothing, and nothing,' the prospective guests didn't believe the servants and sent them packing.

"The king felt sad but unfazed by their rejections and sent more servants to more people with more invitations. This time, though, the invitees didn't just send the servants packing, they got their shorts in a bunch. Some people flat out didn't believe that a good time would be had by all and went back to work so they could earn enough to create their own good times — that is, if the time ever came they felt they had earned enough to kick back for an hour or two.

"Others, though, were insulted, offended even, by the invitation. What cheek for the king to offer something that good for free! Wasn't the king aware that they could pay their own way, thank you very much? That they had saved and scrimped and amassed enough to buy their ticket through their years of hard work, sacrifice, and loyalty? Did the king think they *needed* the king's charity? How dare he!

"They showed the king just how insulting the suggestion was. They grabbed the king's servants and held them down while they insulted and mocked them, and for good measure (lest the king still not get the message), they killed a bunch of the servants, too.

"Well, if the king was sad before, that was nothing compared to now. He was so sad that he got annoyed. And then he got sadder, and then he got madder. Incensed! Furious!

"These people!" the king raged. 'Punching their time clocks at work and at synagogue, scratching a tick mark for each thump of their fist onto their "penitent" breasts, relying on their fancy Ivy League degrees and McMansions and Beemers to prove they are my A-Listers.' The king let out an exasperated sigh. 'No matter how many times I repeat myself, they still bluster and get mad when I tell them there is no ticket. No membership fee. There isn't even a bloody time share. Clearly, telling them isn't working. I need a new game plan: I need to blow it up.

"I need to shred their time cards. Erase their tick marks. Burn their degrees and houses and cars. Because they are dead wrong about needing to buy tickets, they're also dead wrong about me.

"And being dead wrong about me means they're already dead.

"To prove it, I'll kill some of them off to show them they can't tell the difference.'

He said to his servants 'Make it so.' The servants did. And the would-be guests didn't.

"But the king still had a problem. There were no guests for the banquet where there was a choice of entree of Kobe beef steaks, wild-caught salmon, or vegetarian casserole of pumpkin, wild rice, and tart cherries; dozens of salads like the heirloom-tomato salad with fresh basil and sea salt; baskets of fresh, warm foccacia, sourdough, and challah; fountains of ginger-limeade or Prosecco; tables crammed with fruit pies, cream pies, a seven-tier Italian wedding cake, gelato, and cheese and Honeycrisp apples. Not to mention the ice sculptures of pandas, the DNA helix, and supernovas, and the fifty-piece jazz orchestra and dance floor under a double rainbow. Everything was ready, being kept warm or chilled or frozen, ready to be plated and 'ooh-ed' and 'ahhh-ed' over.

"Now what? *Light bulb!*

"The king called for the servants he still had left.

"Laughing and grinning ear to ear he bellowed, 'Out into the streets, my hearties! Invite 'em all! Anyone you see! Everyone you see! I don't care if they are serving soup in the soup kitchen, or in line to get the soup. I don't care if they are the sex workers, their pimps, or their johns. I don't care if they are like Mother Teresa, the Dali Lama, Martin Luther King, Joe Biden or Donald Trump. I don't care if they are strung out on oxycontin, the ones who sold it to them, or the shareholders who profit from the sales. To the top of the hill, to the straight and the narrow, to the bottom of the ditch, bring

'em one, bring 'em all! And if they don't own a Calvin Klein tux or a Dior gown, have one waiting for them!

"The servants scurried off, bowing to each person they met, requesting the honor of their presence.

"They came. They *all* came. And they kept coming until the banquet hall was shoulder to shoulder, and there wasn't a seat that wasn't filled.

"Arriving last so that he could have the pleasure of walking in to see his vision of the party in full swing, the king made his entrance during the salad course. Happy chatter filled the room, the glitter and glam sparkled enough to make the king squint, the jazz orchestra was playing in full bee-bop joy, and a few dozen guests who couldn't wait were already cutting up a rug. When those nearest saw the king's entrance, they fell silent. The silence made its way in a wave until it reached the back of the room, and the orchestra set down their instruments and the dancers went still.

"The king, smiling so much that his face hurt, moved his eyes from table to table, nodding his head to the diners in gratitude for accepting his invitation.

"That is, until the king's eyes traveled to table 17. Hold up a sec. One guy was still in his business casual clothes. He hadn't put on his tux. What was up with that?

"The king weaved his way through the tables. He stood behind the guest and bent down to his ear. *Sotto voce*, the king asked, 'My dear fellow, guest at *my* party. Where is your tux?'

"The guest continued to eyeball his plate of half-eaten Caesar salad, and said nothing.

"Now, had the guest said anything, anything at all, this is what would have happened next.

"Had the guest said, 'I'm just not someone who dresses to impress,' the king would have said, 'Oh, get over yourself! The monkey suit is just to add to the festivities! You wouldn't be impressing anyone, because you're already impressive because you're here! Come on, you overlooked the peach and watermelon salad, my favorite! Let me get you some!'

"Or if the guest had said, 'I thought the invitation they gave me was a mistake and I wasn't really supposed to be here. I would have felt like even more of a party crasher if I'd put on the tux,' the king would have said, 'Nope! Wrong! The invitation was exactly for you! Precisely for you! Didn't you know that you're up first for karaoke later?'

"Instead, because he said nothing, this is what did happen. By saying nothing the guest gave the king nothing to work with. The king could offer nothing back. No rejoinder, no reassurance, no peach and watermelon salad. The guy needed to give the king *something* to show he knew that this was a two-way street, a give and take, a back and forth to hash out what he and the king meant to each other.

"If the guest said nothing it was because to him, the king meant nothing. And if the king meant nothing, then the guest didn't belong there because there was nothing there for him.

"Alas, as a result, there was nothing else to be done.

"By now the noon party had gone on so long that it was well past midnight. The king called his bouncers and they chucked the guest through the front door and out into the dark.

"In a nanosecond, the guest went from the glow of ten thousand candles, to lightlessness; from the tinkle of laughter and flute and crystal glasses after the toasts, to soundlessness; from handshakes and embraces and the warmth of eyes being met, to nothingness.

"In shock, the guest wept. Then he sobbed. And then he wailed with regret for having waited for the other shoe to drop even though everyone was dancing barefoot, and for his stupidity for not accepting a good thing — the best thing, his place at the table — while he sat in it.

"It would take time, a long time, for his sobs to slacken enough for the guest to sense a presence, before it would dawn on him that he was in fact, not alone. Because once the other guests finished the feast and were dancing the Macarena, the king would slip out the back door and walk around the hall through the dark, seeing as easily and moving as lithely as a cat, to stand a bit behind the guest to his left. The guest didn't realize it yet, but the door through which he had been thrown had slammed shut behind him — but not been locked.

"As the king waited for the guest to cry himself out, the king reflected on the many parties he had thrown. Tonight was better than most in that only one guest got tossed out. Usually there were scores of them. So many got invited. So many declined.

So many others arrived, but always there were those who didn't think they should stay, and didn't.

"But the best part, the king remembered as he smiled, was when they felt their way back through the dark to the door, tried the handle, and felt it turn."

(Based on the commentaries by Robert Farrar Capon *The Parables of Judgement*, pp 118-128, and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Difficult Words of Jesus*, pp 114-115.)

P.S. I gave permission to use this midrash (with attribution) as the sermon to a preacher who requested it. You are welcome to do the same. Think of it as having a last minute guest preacher! Have fun with it, and let me know how it's received!