

Many are invited, but few are chosen

Matthew 22:2-14

April 6, 2008

With just one sentence, one seven-word sentence, Jesus manages to upset everybody!

Many are invited, but few are chosen ...

Many are invited ... What a typically liberal, uncritical, kum ba yah, group hug, I'm OK/you're OK thing to say!

When his invited guests fail to respond to the wedding invitation, the king in Jesus' story has his servants go out and invite everybody, anybody they can find. They invite good people. They invite bad people. They don't care who you are -- just come! No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey ... you're invited!

Now let's be very clear about what Jesus is suggesting about the kingdom of God. I want you to think of the person you'd least like to be sitting next to at a wedding banquet, the hateful person you'd least like to have sitting next to you in church or walking up with you to receive communion, the person you'd least expect to be there when God showers the blessings of heaven on all his most favored children. The disagreeable person, the disgusting person, the hurtful person, the cruel person, the scary person. The terrorist, the atheist, the fundamentalist, the holy roller, the bigot, the snob.

They're invited! They are all invited! And with those three words -- *many are invited* -- Jesus repudiates all the discriminating Christians who try so hard to draw a clear line between good guys and bad guys, between saints and sinners, between those who are "in" and those who are "out."

But hold on! Not so fast, you open-minded, free-thinking defenders of tolerance and equal-opportunity religion! You may want to wait before you start to gloat, because Jesus has more to say: *Few are chosen*.

Sir? Excuse me, sir? You don't seem to be properly dressed. Where are your wedding clothes? And how did you ever get in without them? Tie him up! Take him away! Throw him out!

Few are chosen ... The door may be left wide open, but not everybody gets to stay for the party. There is judgment. There is discrimination. There is rejection.

But it's not fair! Why invite them all in, just to kick them all out again? Why should anybody be excluded? And just for wearing the wrong clothes!

Jesus seems to set limits on God's love. He seems to mark boundaries around God's grace. His words are a slap in the face to all the open-armed Christians who are reluctant to leave anybody out. And he makes me wonder. If few are chosen, will I be among them?

Many are invited, but few are chosen ...

So, is everybody upset now? Good! Jesus is making you think! But think about this: a good bit of the reason this sentence and this parable make us upset is that we miss the point.

We see the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, God's wedding banquet, as a reward for good behavior, a blessing given to those who deserve it, to those who in some way have earned the right to enjoy God's blessing.

So for us, the critical question is: Who gets in and who doesn't? Who is let in and who is left out? We wonder where we are going to end up. We worry about whether or not we'll be let in.

It's all about gaining entry, about finding a way to win God's approval so we can get in. And we ask ourselves: *Why shouldn't I be welcome in the kingdom of God?* And we ask ourselves: *Why should he or she be welcome in the kingdom of God?*

But what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is not the destination, but the way. The kingdom of God is not a reward for good behavior, but the good behavior itself. The kingdom of God is not the blessing God's love affords us, but the blessing that is God's love.

The kingdom of God is life as God intends it. The kingdom of God is all of creation moving in harmony as God designed it. The kingdom of God is people in right relationship -- at peace -- with each other and with God as God wills it. The kingdom of God is shalom.

So do you see why it is unthinkable that someone should be at the wedding party without proper dress? How can you be in shalom, without being in shalom? How can you enjoy peace, when you are not at peace? How can you celebrate harmony, without being in harmony? How can you enjoy God's love, without being in love with God?

How can you be a part of the wedding feast, when you haven't come dressed for it? It's not a matter of winning God's approval, but a matter of what you do with it.

Many are invited. It's easy to get in. All are welcome. You are welcome. You are invited! You don't have to pass a test. You don't have to earn your invitation. You don't have to prove you're good enough to get in. This is grace! This is the wonderful, awesome, truly amazing grace of God!

But what is grace? Grace is not a free pass. It's not a get-out-of-jail-free card. It's not a nod of approval from God who really doesn't care all that much about that state of the world or the state of your soul.

Grace is the life-changing gift of a loving God who cares very much about the state of the world and the state of your soul! God's kindness is meant to lead to a change of heart! We are not forgiven so we may go and sin all the more. We are not set free so we may go and once more serve the princes of this world. We are not given life so we may continue to follow the paths that lead to death. We are not given light so we may continue to walk in the darkness.

Forgiveness, freedom, life, light are the kingdom of God. You are welcome to enter it ... and to act like you belong! Walk in the light! Celebrate life! Live as the free men and women you are! Go and sin no more!

Come into the banquet hall! You're invited! You are welcome! And be sure to put on your best wedding clothes, because it's going to be the party of a lifetime!