# Excuses, Excuses

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**Third Presbyterian Church**
**October 12, 2014 (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)**
**Matthew 22:1-14**

One of the many things I like about my position here at Third Church is that my days and weeks are so varied.  None is the same. One day I'm meeting with our tutors at one of the schools we serve. Another day I'm trying to put together a coherent sermon. Other days might involve the East Avenue Grocery Run, or something to do with Habitat for Humanity, or the Food Cupboard, or Dining Room Ministry, or weekly staff meetings. Every single day I'm trying to manage the incessant stream of emails that hit my inbox – all good stuff!

But in recent days, I have been all-consumed with getting out invitations. It is that season.  It began with invitations for Meals with a Meaning.  And one of my favorite invitations to extend, the Exploring Membership Dinner we are hosting tonight at 6pm.  If you are new to Third Church and want to find out more about this community, and you've somehow missed any of the written or verbal announcements about it, consider this your invitation to attend.

Even with all that, the invitation list that has had me buried in the weeds this week is the list of community leaders that our Great Schools for All coalition is inviting to a November 10 Education Symposium.  You may recall that last spring, eleven people including myself traveled to Raleigh, North Carolina.  We went to see what we could learn about breaking down the effects of concentrated poverty in public schools.  That was part one of a two-way exchange.  Some of you heard us tell that story at our recent UPT Education night.  If you missed that, we'll retell it during the 9:30 adult spiritual formation hour next Sunday.  Consider this your invitation to attend that!

Part two of this two-way exchange happens November 10, when leaders that we met down in Raleigh will come here to Rochester, and participate with us in the Education Symposium.  We hope to draw together a broad cross-section of 150 or so community leaders across racial/ethnic lines in education, business, health care, charitable organizations, government, and faith communities - all to develop a common vision for equitable education for all students in our community, no matter what the child's socio-economic status happens to be.

It's a big, long-term vision.  But to get there, first we have to organize the conference and the guest list.  And we all know, the devil is in the details!  What's our maximum capacity?  Who should we invite?  Have we got all of the key constituencies represented? Who would be miffed to be left off the list?  Have we got an email address for them?  What online invitation platform should we use?  Knowing that not everyone who is invited can come, how many should we invite so that we get as close to our goal as possible?  All those questions had me dreaming about Excel spreadsheets in the middle of the night!  Imagine my horror on Friday afternoon when I thought I saved the updated invitation file under a new name, and then couldn't find it anywhere, so had to go back to an old version and reconstruct work I'd already done.

It's a big vision worth mucking through the details.  It's a big vision that I pray is rooted in God's kingdom vision of justice and mercy.  But what if they don't come?  What if our invited guests don't come?  What if they blow us off?  What will we do then?

It's the dilemma faced by the king in the ominous-sounding parable Jesus told the religious leaders of his day. There was king whose son was getting married, and he prepared a wedding reception that for its day would rival anything that would be featured on theknot.com.

He sent his servants out to get those he'd invited – the local elites, the VIPs, the people with whom one wants to be seen. And they would not come. They would not come to the king's banquet. He sent more slaves out to tell them, "I've put together the finest menu, with the best cuts of meat; the feast is ready, so come."

Scholars suggest that this double invitation allowed potential guests to find out who was coming and whether everything had been properly arranged. If the right people were coming, everyone else would come. If right people stayed away, everyone else would stay away. Apparently, the right people weren't coming. So the invited guests did what humans still often do when they disapprove – they make excuses (I'm buying more land; I have fields to plant; I have business to attend to), and as an exclamation point they kill messengers, literally. A little passive-aggressive, perhaps?

It's a direct insult to the king's honor, and in turn the invitees suffer the consequences, of which the violent specifics make us uncomfortable. I don't have the best answer as to why it's there; Luke's version doesn't have it. Many commentators suggest that Matthew's telling is influenced by the Roman troops' destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, and that it brings the future of God's kingdom life into the present situation of his readers.

One thing I do know, however. Parables by nature make us uncomfortable. Jesus told them to make those who were sure they had all the answers think again about God's economy, about God's way in the world. So if these troubling details make us reflect a little deeper, maybe that's reason enough.

There's a sense of great importance, of great urgency in accepting this exceptional invitation. It pushes us to think about what urgent invitation from God we have put off, and for which we've made excuses. What party has God thrown that we've missed, because we've failed to go?

The party must go on, in spite of willful rejection. So the king told his servants to go out and bring in everyone they can find – everyone from the fringes – the nobodies, the tax collectors, prostitutes, those who were blind, who couldn't walk – whether they were good or bad, worthy or unworthy, bring them in. Let them feast at the banquet. Let them revel at the party.

It completely reverses what's expected in ancient urban societies, where you do not cross status lines to fellowship around the same table. That the king would cross those boundaries was startling.

In some places, not much has changed. I remember a story my brother told about the first year he lived and worked in Mexico. He and his wife wanted to host a Christmas party at their home for the entire office staff and their spouses. Maybe 30 people total. He was advised by his secretary that it would not be appropriate to invite secretaries and drivers to such an executive event. Not only would it not be appropriate, she said, but they wouldn't come even if he did invite them. He did anyway. And his secretary was right – they did not come to the party.

Which makes me think about this parable in another way – that it's not just astonishing that the king crosses lines of class and status; it's just as shocking that the "good and the bad," the guests from the margins, would cross those lines, too. It's just as surprising that those on the borders of society would actually **accept** the king's invitation. It's not what they would normally do. It seems that through the extension of the king's invitation, something happened that caused them to transform, to respond, to come to the banquet, to put on a wedding robe, and feast at the party.

They all did that, except for one.  One didn't put on the wedding clothes.  He didn't properly dress for the party, and he got kicked out.  And once again, we are made uncomfortable by this parable, for it seems like bad news.  But maybe it's not.  Although God loves us as we are, N.T. Wright also reminds us that Jesus never said "you're all right as you are."  To those he met, Jesus changed and healed them.  His love reached them where they were, but his love also wanted them transformed.  He wanted them to put on the clothing of love, justice, and mercy.  Every invitation from God is a call to respond in faith.

When Vincenzo was baptized this morning, it was God's gift of grace and also God's invitation to respond to that grace with repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship.  We come as guests invited, as the hymn says, and we go as servants sent to the edges of our world to summon the guests.

But so many times we limit ourselves with a vision of God that is too small.  We'll settle for a vision of God who throws a bag of fast food down on the table along with a couple of paper plates and napkins, and whoever's first to the table gets it.  But what would happen if our vision was of a God whose banquet table was big enough to seat and feed all of the children of Rochester, even the ones from the poorest zip codes, at the table of learning?  Could we find the courage to advocate for and make bold structural change so that they can?

What would happen if our vision was of a divine banquet table big enough to seat every person in the developing world?  Would it change how we respond to what World Bank President Jim Yong Kim calls the inequality crisis of the Ebola outbreak?   In the Huffington Post he pointed out, "The knowledge and infrastructure to treat the sick and contain the virus exists in high- and middle-income countries.  However, over many years, we have failed to make these things accessible to low-income people in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. So now thousands of people in these countries are dying because, in the lottery of birth, they were born in the wrong place."

There is a tension all throughout the gospel – the tension of God's choosing us and faithfully, even urgently responding with all the gusto of specially honored guest.

Walter Brueggemann writes, "If you take God as a feast-giver, then you must conduct yourself as a guest at a feast.  A wedding is a time of newness and joy and generosity, and you must give signs that you are prepared for newness and joy, ready to begin again with some buoyancy…You see,…you cannot act as though the character of God had nothing to do with you.  The character of God has everything to do with you…You are summoned to receive the newness… [to be] fed at the banquet."  Matthew offers "a God who is not bland and not domesticated and not safe."  And therein lies our salvation.  Amen.