

Don't Fail to R.S.V.P.

Pentecost 17
Matthew 22:1-14
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Have you ever sent out invitations to a big event – a wedding, a shower, a party – and asked the invitees to let you know if they're coming? Did everyone let you know – one way or the other? It's hard to plan for something special if you don't know who's coming. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a wedding banquet and the response – or lack of response – the host received to his invitation.

The parable follows a question in Matthew's Gospel that the chief priests and elders have consistently asked of Jesus and have demanded an answer: **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”** (Matthew 21:23) Jesus frames his response in the following manner: **“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”** This wedding banquet is a big event. The invitations have been sent out. *“Respondez, s'il vous plait”* is the French phrase abbreviated as RSVP. We've seen it on invitations sent to us as well as ones we've sent out. It means: **“Reply, please.”** In other words, let the host or hostess know whether you're coming.

In ancient societies – and in many respects still today – nothing could bestow more honor to oneself and one's family than being invited to a royal wedding. This is the kind of event that you mark on your calendar, that you share the good news with family and friends, and that you start planning what to wear weeks if not months in advance. It's a be-there-at-all-cost, can't-miss-it celebration. And you definitely want to RSVP.

So, what happens? **“[The king] sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.”**

Clearly these people have no respect for the king. They're full of excuses and full of themselves. They're too busy to be bothered and have little interest in attending a banquet. It's not too hard to relate to this part of the parable, is it? "Sorry, I can't come to the Sunday celebration: There's soccer practice . . . It's my only day off . . . I've got a tee-time at 9 a.m."

In the parable, we're told that those invited treated the king's invitation as no big deal. So much for their opinion of the king. Did they fear him? Did they love him? Did they trust him? Obviously they didn't, if you consider their actions. The result, as we read in the parable: **"The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city."**

By ancient standards, the king is facing a tremendous amount of shame. And the situation must be dealt with. In other words, he must save face. And it's this part of the parable that is most troubling, especially if we tend to equate the king in the parable with our Heavenly Father. Can God be so harsh, so violent? There are those other passages in the Bible that highlight his anger: **"Let no one deceive you with empty words," says St. Paul in Ephesians (5:6), "for because of these things (immorality, impurity, greed) the WRATH OF GOD comes upon the sons of disobedience." John says in his Gospel (3:36): "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the WRATH OF GOD remains on him."** We tend to ignore these passages, don't we? Whether or not we equate the king in the parable with God, the fact remains that God's judgment is sure and certain.

And yet, there's more to the parable. **"Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (vs. 8-10).** The banquet will not have empty tables. The king will have his party, even if he has to round up the so-called dregs of society. And that should give us pause: If you or I think we deserve a seat at the table, we'd better be careful. We may find ourselves on the outside looking in. The haughty, you see, have no place to sit when the king throws a party, especially if they think they deserve a place.

And just when you think you start to understand what's going on in this parable – the banquet is ready, new guests have arrived, time to crank up the music – Jesus throws all of us a curve: **"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him,**

‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen” (vs. 11-14).

First of all, what is this wedding robe? And what difference does it make? If you were ever invited to a gala event where the president of the United States or the Queen of England is present, you’ll be told what to wear. And if you don’t follow the dress code, you can be assured you will not be allowed inside. We’re talking formal wear here, not cutoffs and flip flops, nor some extreme outfit that you might see at the Academy Awards or the MTV Awards!

Apparently the poor guy in the parable of the wedding banquet didn’t read the small print on his invitation. He’s thrown into outer darkness where we’re told there will be gnashing of teeth. Jesus doesn’t give us a clue about why this happens. Didn’t the man wear the clothes he was given? Is he protesting the dress code? What’s going on here?

What we do know is that to wear a wedding robe is to know the significance of the occasion. This is the king’s banquet for his son! This is a celebration. The chief priests and elders don’t understand that the Son of God himself stands before them in the person of Jesus. All power and authority has been given to him by God.

But what do they do? They arrest him, humiliate him, and have him crucified – just as the king’s slaves were mistreated and killed in the parable. But the king’s Son, our Lord Jesus, will be vindicated. On the third day he rose again. The wedding banquet, which will be celebrated in its fullness at the end of time, has now begun!

So, what does this parable mean for you and me? You and I were given our wedding robes at our baptism. You and I received the invitation to come and celebrate the Son of God’s victory – a feast akin to a royal wedding. We are entering the anteroom of the heavenly Jerusalem and we’re called to get ready by repentance, by prayer and by our serving others who are the outcasts. But take note: We will be left out if we think that God expects no RSVP, no response from us.

Wearing a wedding robe means that we know the significance of the occasion. It means that we're ready to respond to God's gracious invitation and let him change our lives. It means we're willing to live as his faithful servants. Your and my baptism is where it started: **“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death,” St. Paul says in Romans, “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:4)**

You and I have been given the robes. You and I have been called to join the celebration – with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven – dressed in our finest for a feast of everlasting joy.

Don't fail to RSVP.