

You're Invited
Exodus 32:1-14
Matthew 22:1-14

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Don't you love getting an invitation in the mail? Most of the mail that comes to my house is either bills or junk – a mix of catalogs and credit card solicitations. Amid so much junk, an invitation stands out. I got a really nice one a few days ago: high-quality paper, extra-large envelope, addressed by hand in beautiful calligraphy. Not all invitations come by mail. Some are extended by phone or in person. And not all invitations are to a wedding or birthday party or baby shower. Some invitations are more intimate: “Will you join me for dinner?” Some call for thoughtful deliberation: “Will you accept this new position and responsibility?” A precious few call for unparalleled commitment: “Will you marry me?” All invitations whether they come printed on special paper or extended intimately and personally, all invitations call for a response. One either accepts the invitation or declines with regret.

The parable that we read today from Matthew's gospel is a parable about invitations. A king hosts a great wedding feast for his son. In the first part of the parable, the highly-esteemed invited guests either do not accept the king's invitation at all, or they accept the invitation but then back out at the last minute. Decline with regret.

The angry king is left with a roast in the oven and no one to eat it. So in the second part of the parable, the king sends his servants out into the main streets, telling them to invite everyone they find to come and join the banquet. The obedient servants did just that – they gathered everyone they could find, good and bad alike, until there were enough guests to fill the banquet hall. At last, the invitation has been accepted.

The story from Exodus is not exactly a story about invitations. However, it is a story that only makes sense because it is framed by God's invitation to Israel and Israel's acceptance of that invitation. All the way back in Exodus chapter four (4:31) and again in chapter twelve (12:28) the people of Israel accepted the Lord's invitation to deliver them from slavery in Egypt; in response, they promised to worship the Lord and do all he commanded. God's invitation was not just to freedom, but to covenant relationship between Israel and God. Perhaps it is best summed up this way: “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12). Israel accepts unconditionally, “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex. 24:7).

But there is more to an invitation than just accepting. Mailing the R.S.V.P. card is not the same as attending the wedding ceremony. Accepting a new position is only a first step toward success. You must then show up for work and do you very best. A healthy marriage is not built on simply saying “I do,” but on a lifetime of choices that demonstrate fidelity and mutual respect.

Accepting an invitation, even the invitation to relationship with God and Christ, is an important first step. But it is not the end, or even the most important moment, in the journey of faith.

The Exodus reading for today and the rest of Jesus' parable in Matthew paint a picture of what happens when we accept God's gracious invitation but then do not participate fully in the gospel life. In the parable, one man at the party is found to be without his wedding robe; he is dressed inappropriately – like coming to a black tie affair in shorts and a t-shirt. We can liken this to one who claims Christ but whose life exhibits no transformation or bears no fruit. The king finds this man unfit for the party and has him thrown out into the darkness.

If you want a more specific, less allegorical example, then we must look no farther than Exodus. Here are God's covenant people, chosen by God in grace, delivered by God from slavery in Egypt, fed by God with manna from heaven. They have heard God's promise to be their God, and they have accepted the invitation to be God's people. But with their leader, Moses, up on a mountain top conversing with God, the people have become restless and forgetful. It was Moses, not God, they insist who brought them out of Egypt. And since Moses is nowhere to be seen, they make for themselves a new god – a calf fashioned out of gold. They build an altar and have a festival and bring burnt-offerings to the new golden god. They even give this new god the credit for leading them out of Egypt. Israel's life shows no sign of transformation; it bears no fruit. They have shown up to the wedding feast wearing shorts and a T-shirt. God's response is like that of the king in the parable. God speaks to Moses and declares his intent to destroy these stiff-necked people.

We don't much like to hear about God's judgment, or even justice. But for me, at least, it is reason to give thanks. That God is a God of judgment is good news. Perhaps it is a little fear inducing to the extent we are each aware of our own stiff necks, but it is also a source of great relief. That God is a God of judgment means that there will be no evil in the heavenly kingdom, for God will not allow it. In the end, God will not allow his children to worship the false gods of greed, power, self-sufficiency, or violence. There will be no murder or war or hunger or poverty or pain in the heavenly kingdom because God has judged them unfit for his realm. If God were not a God of judgment, the heavenly kingdom would look exactly like this earthly one. It is because of God's judgment that we hope for an eternity which is better (divinely speaking) than the present.

And yet, judgment is not the only word we have from God. Exodus 32 does not end with God's word of judgment and punishment. Moses remembered what the people got wrong: it was God (not Moses and not a golden calf) who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. Surely this same God would not now destroy the very people he saved? If the people perished now, how would Egypt ever know that this God is good and mighty? Surely God will remember his ancient promise to Abraham to make a great nation of him.

In what I imagine to be a most intimate conversation between Moses and the Lord, the Lord relents. God changes his mind. Here in Exodus, we have a God who, because of Moses' passionate intercession, relents from punishing: who withholds his very justified wrath for the sake of his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and so that the world might know that this God is indeed both mighty and good.

What is the faithful reader to make of these two scriptures: a parable marked by justice and a story defined by mercy? Do we worship a God who is fickle – who sometimes metes out justice and other times extends mercy? Must we live with nagging uncertainty, like a misbehaving child worried about what mood his father will be in when he gets home from work?

By no means. God is neither fickle nor moody. As Moses reminds the Lord and us, it was God who first chose to enter into covenant relationship with his people. It was God who brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt. It was God who spread the invitation far and wide, to the good and the bad, to come feast at his banquet. The Lord's purposes are for the glory of his name among all the peoples of the earth and for the salvation of Israel and finally the whole world. When we experience God's judgment or delight in his mercy, we can be confident that God's good purpose remains unchanged.

As for us, those who have accepted God's gracious invitation to live in covenant relationship with him, let us seek to live lives that are worthy of the invitation we have received and accepted. Let us live lives that bear fruit – not as a condition for citizenship in God's kingdom, but in grateful response to the banquet that God has already set before us. You have been invited to a great feast, come dressed appropriately. You have accepted a very special job – a manager in God's kingdom; carry out its responsibilities to the best of your ability. You have entered in to a precious relationship; live faithfully. And let us never cease to pray with Moses that God's justice and God's mercy work together until God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.