

The Invitation
Matthew 22:1-14, Pentecost 17, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Chad moved to Paragould in the middle of the spring semester. His birthday was in early May, and a few weeks before that I received an invitation in the mail. It was custom-made to pique the interest of a third-grader. The edges were all silver glitter, and the futuristic rocket ship in the center looked like something from Disney's "Space Mountain." The card said something like, "Captain Amazing and his Galaxy Battalion invite you to celebrate Chad's 9th birthday party. The fate of the universe depends on it!"

Despite the super-cool invitation, I didn't want to go. I barely knew Chad, but he lived just over the hill from me, and the party was a way for my mother to get me out of the house on a Saturday. So I dutifully took the wrapped Shogun Warrior my mom had bought as a present and walked to the party.

I arrived late, and as I approached Chad's house, I could tell his mother had decked out the backyard as something like the site of the moon landing. Campy space music emitted from a cassette recorder. Waiting at the door was an enormous ceramic bowl full of party favors: molded plastic water pistols, all shaped like laser guns.

Chad's mother was buzzing around the kitchen, arranging refreshments, recounting the candles on the cake, and talking to herself. Chad sat at the kitchen table with the oddest look on his face. It only took me a few seconds to realize what caused Chad's mom to move so furtively and caused his own catatonic expression. *No one else was there.* At least a hundred dollars of 1981 money had been spent on this party. Chad undoubtedly had been up since dawn with excitement. The party favors were the best I'd ever seen. And no one came. Unless you count me, and from that second on my only goal was to get out of there as fast as I could, preferably with a molded plastic water pistol in hand.

Today Jesus tells us a parable about God's great party. It is like the best wedding reception you've ever attended, with food, wine and dancing. The Hollywood movie "Wedding Crashers" has nothing on God's wedding feast. The invitations to this most compelling party have been sent. Check your mailbox or your Facebook page. I promise there's one waiting for

you. We're all invited, every one of us. And yet, with mystifying irony, Jesus tells this parable as though the end of the story has already happened. And he says that in the end very many of those openly invited to God's party *won't come*. Why would that be?

What invitations do we decline? *Why* do we decline them? In my experience, there are two reasons. The first is, simply, the conflict of other engagements. We commit ourselves to some things, and that makes it impossible to attend others. We can't, after all, be in two places at once.

The second reason is more complicated. It's one we don't like to admit to ourselves, and we'll rationalize all sorts of excuses in its place. But the real reason is this: We decline some invitations because we feel unworthy of them. We may subconsciously fear that our social skills or social standing are not on par with our host's. We may have made some mistake in our lives that we fear will be judged by the knowing glances of others at the party. Or, we may simply fear that we're too fumbling, too timid, or too obnoxious, and that no one in his right mind would want to socialize with us. Whatever it is, our feelings of unworthiness ultimately lead us to decline invitations, to skip the party.

Both of these reasons—conflicts of time and feelings of unworthiness—are at play in Jesus' parable today. In Luke's version of this same story, conflicts are explicitly mentioned as the reasons some refuse to come to the party: "I've just bought a piece of land I must inspect instead," says one invited guest. "I've just gotten married myself," says another.

But lest we forget, the resolution of every conflict involves a choice. With good or poor rationale, when we decline one invitation in favor of another, we place relative value on the invitations. Sometimes the first invitation received is given precedence and thus greater value, and often that's as it should be. Other times, we'll value some friends over others, or some activities as more enjoyable than others. Some engagements we'll choose because they require less effort on our part.

All of these valuations are operative when we check the in-box of our souls and realize that God invites us, too. God doesn't check our calendars before inviting us to experience Him in a new way, and sometimes we have prior, worldly plans already firmly in place. Other times, our worldly luxuries simply seem like more fun than responding openly to God. And still other times, knowing God more deeply just seems like too much effort.

We employ all these excuses. But when the consideration of God's invitation is at hand, can there ever really be anything of greater value than the offer of connection to the source of us? The history of the saints is the history of men and women who have accepted God's invitation and discovered that all other value falls away when in the presence of the Holy. There is nothing greater; there is nothing more. If conflicts exist when God calls, clear the calendar!

The other reason that we decline God's invitation—the fear that we are unworthy—at first seems confirmed by Jesus today. In his parable, after the first invited guests have refused to come to God's banquet, the king says, "Those who were invited *were not worthy.*"

Is there something innate in us, or something we've done in our lives, that makes us unworthy of the invitation to know God?

The answer is given when we see who makes God's guest list the second time around. Jesus tells us, "The slaves went out to the streets and gathered *all* whom they found, *both good and bad*; so the wedding hall was filled with guests."

In words, God's invitation is indiscriminate. Because God always sees us through the lens of grace, there is no one unworthy of being invited. *Nothing* we are, and *nothing* we do, can change how precious, how worthy, we are to God. When we read this parable with care, we see that the *only* thing that renders those first invited guests unworthy is their *refusal to come to the party!* The *only* thing that can separate us from communion with God is our decision not to come.

We see that even at the end of Jesus' parable, when one shows up but without a wedding robe. He has arrived in person, but not in spirit. He wants the party favors of the banquet, but he doesn't care to know, to experience deeply, the host. He's not really there at all.

This parable of woe turns out to be Good News. God invites us all, to know him, to abide in his enveloping love, to be honored guests at his banquet both now and for eternity. Clear the calendar! The party favor is grace. Even you and I are worthy, if only we will answer the gift of God's invitation to us and come.

Amen.