**The Challenge of Invitation**

Narrative Lectionary, Lent III

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Matthew 22: 1-14 Russell Mitchell-Walker

When I started thinking about this passage earlier this week, before I had read it, I thought I had some ideas for the message. Then when I read it I knew that I must have been thinking of Luke’s version which has people making many excuses – remember the children’s song: I cannot come….? There is anger at the excuses by the master of the house but no killing like in Matthew. Matthew’s is just harsh! What do we do with the violence and harshness of this parable? How does it fit with Jesus’ overall message? What does Matthew want us to know? I had trouble understanding all the violence until I focused on the issues of host and guest and the power dynamics between them. I found it helps to look at the context both in the gospel and of the time.

This passage happens during what we celebrate now as Holy week, after the Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem. After entering Jerusalem Jesus goes to the Temple and turns over the tables of the moneychangers. The week includes many challenges of Jesus’ authority by the religious leaders which he always turns around to challengings them, and how they used their power. So there was much challenge to the Pharisees and Scribes before the parable we are exploring today.

In the culture of the time, someone wealthy and powerful, like the king in this story, would have hosted a wedding banquet like this one. Those invited of equal status or wealth would be asked to take on the role of guest – to recognize the expectations of the host. It would be a real insult to the host when those invited did not come. The response of the king is an exaggeration to make a point of the importance of honouring the invitation. The violence on all sides can be a distraction to the message. The honouring of the invitation and being a guest is what is important. When the king recognized the first invited guests were not worthy, as named in the text, we can view that as they have not honoured being a guest. The king then extends an invitation to everyone his servants can find, the good and the bad. Is Jesus challenging the religious authorities about what it means to open the invitation to all in God’s world? Did the Pharisees and Scribes understand the paradox of what it meant to have power often as hosts in who they invite, and to recognize that they are also guests in the context of God’s world?

The story continues with the response to the person who is not wearing a wedding garment. You have a king inviting everyone and going against the cultural norms, but continuing to honour the culture of the wedding celebration. Many commentaries refer to the host providing a wedding robe for their guests as a cultural practice of the time. While all of the poor and outcast are welcome and invited, the one who did not put on the robe was not respecting the expectation of the culture of a wedding celebration. This guest, was not honouring the invitation of the host, similar to the first invited. It can be important to note all the other guests in all their diversity did come and honoured the wedding customs and expectations.

This week I took a webinar, called how to Ask from the Pulpit, about stewardship, exploring giving and talking about money in the context of preaching. While that was its title the content was broader than that. One of the issues they named was the importance of helping our members understand the church’s expectations of being , a follower of Jesus. We recognize now as church that the primary value for people coming to church is the importance of having the sense of belonging. Once we have a sense of being part of the community, that we belong, we then look to what behaviours are important to be part of the community. We as a congregation of Eastside act as hosts to all that enter and live with the paradox of also being a guest within our Living Spirit Community. We do know, no one is going to be killed if they don’t live up to our behaviours or expectations! But how else do we hinder building relationships between us? Many of our expectations can be hidden in our assumptions of what people know or don’t know. What does it mean to you to be a member of or active in a church? Do you feel you are meeting the expectations that you have of yourself or that you think Eastside or the Living Spirit Centre has of you? What traditions do we hold as expectations or the ‘wedding garment’ of our time? These might include the expectations of attendance, the amount of giving that’s needed – time, talent and treasures. We may not do well at offering this guidance to people who are ready for it, as we want to respect people’s different needs, abilities, and schedules. It does however raise the question that some guidance may be helpful in supporting our community in being faithful. As we continue to move through this time how open are we to hearing the recommendations from the Review Commission and what new expectations it may include?

A significant part of the story is about invitation. When we are invited we become the guest. This week, in our book study [Practices for Refounding God’s People](https://www.amazon.ca/Practices-Refounding-Gods-People-Missional/dp/0819233846/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1542745055&sr=8-1&keywords=Practices+for+refounding+God%27s+People), the authors identify that to refound the church in our time, we need to be guests in our communities, rather than hosts as we have been in recent centuries. The authors write:

This is a radical turning of tables; it is a profound change of imagination. What does it mean for a community of God’s people in a local context to ask the question of how they become guests in their own communities, seeing their neighbours as hosts?

If we look at Jesus’ ministry, this is how he operated. He was guest in the communities he went into. He often relied on other people’s hospitality.

I see an opportunity to explore what this means as Naumana, the Muslim woman who came to Messy Church, who also came by to the Community Dinner after the [Vigil for Christchurch](https://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/regina-vigil-remembers-christchurch-massacre), invites us to build bridges. It means taking seriously the invitations she offers to me, to us. She asked me to go with her to the synagogue to experience the Jewish faith together. I could see a group of us joining her and her friends and be clear that we are guests together, being open to learning what we need to know before we go. She is part of the [Islamic Circle of North America Sisters](http://www.icna.org/icna-sisters-wing/) and she is open to seeing how they might help Glen Elm school and the children who are hungry there. I am meeting with the principal on Thursday, who I know from my days at Sunset United Church, to explore what their needs are. While we may have the resources to help, it will be important to remember we are being invited in, we would be the guests. I know that we probably don’t have the capacity to help on our own, but we may be able to do something together as the Living Spirit Centre and with Nuamana’s group. As we are guests, we learn from each other. I was reminded, that Muslim women do not have physical contact with men. I need to be conscious each time I meet her and remember not to shake her hand. When this has happened, she has responded in a friendly, educational manner. Another example of being guest is moving Messy Church to the community center in the fall, where we will be guest at a different space to offer the program to the community. It would be more ideal, if we were invited to offer the program there. What other ways might we move more toward becoming guests rather than hosts in this neighbourhood?

While this story has difficult elements in it, the overall message continues to be the paradox of being host and guest and how we move between them. We are invited to be guests in our local community. May we be open to exploring what that means and notice when we are invited by others, by our neighbours, to seeing God in it. We are called, and the expectations of being faithful can be high and full of challenges. God is with us, and inviting us into that faithfulness with love and grace. May we take up the invitation and see God at work when it happens.