“***Invite Everyone***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Oct. 11, 2020

**Matthew 22:1–13**

1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:2 “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again 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.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness.’”

I’m sure we all had one or more remarkable teachers who were able to explain the most complicated subjects. Jesus is a teacher who knows how to draw the average students in. He tells a story that is full of melodrama. That draws people in. They become interested in his story before they realize he is imparting a spiritual message.

This parable seems to have similar meaning to the parable of the tenant farmers: a king calls people to a banquet for his son’s wedding, but the people he calls are uninterested or unworthy; some of them mistreat the king’s servants, which stands for mistreatment of the prophets. So the king sends out his servants to call everyone, good and bad, which would apparently include lots of Gentiles and uneducated people. But whoever is called, had better be serious when they accept the invitation. If they don’t wear a wedding garment, then they are not sufficiently serious about the occasion. Not wearing a wedding garment is seen as disrespectful to the host. A number of commentators say that the host would have provided wedding garments to all attendees, so this person would have refused the offer.

The parable is a message about respectfulness and readiness. It uses social symbolism to express this message. It says that if you attend a high society wedding, you had better dress properly. You want to be dressed and ready. I think that symbolizes being aware of, and ready for, the seriousness of the setting that you are entering. Don’t make light of the event, like the invited guests did, and don’t treat it disrespectfully, like the casually dressed guest did. The Son’s wedding is a serious as well as a joyous event, and the father wants respectful participants.

So this parable is a deep counterpoint to the message of God’s generosity and the free gift of salvation. While the gift is freely given, the other side of the coin is that God expects real seriousness if you *accept* the gift, and freedom should not lead to laziness or negligence. There is a diligent seriousness that I hear in the readings from Channing and Bushnell that I share every week. For example, this week’s Bushnell quote ends with the line “We need more of the Christian Spirit,” and he is contrasting spirit with letter, with “restrictive dogmas” (*God in Christ*, 116–17). More seriousness will not mean more intellectual pressure to believe certain dogmas. It will mean more responsiveness to God, more *love*, more spiritual conversation with Jesus and God, and more of the authentic spirit that thrilled the early Christians.

It will also mean more *joy*. After all, this *is* a banquet for the Son’s wedding. Perhaps the marriage is between the Son and his church. The father wants people to genuinely celebrate the occasion. Perhaps the event is also like graduating from college; you have on your robes, everyone is gathered around, and you will soon be moving into a new phase of your life. A joyous occasion!

We are *expected* to have the right spirit when we accept an invitation. We need to approach the event with anticipation and respect, a readiness to respond to God’s offer of salvation. I see an example of such responsiveness in Psalm 23. “he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (23:3, 6). That is someone who has experienced the joy of salvation and *expects* to be led in the right paths, to be accompanied by mercy every day. This shows focus, vitality, and determination. It helps to have a trust, a deep faith, in God’s design for your life and your afterlife. Being ready means allowing the inward leadership of God’s Spirit to be with you every step of the way.

How do we know if we have this trust, this readiness? There is no scientific measure we can take. But we can see evidence of our readiness in our spiritual fruits, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self control (Gal 5:22–23). Just as we cannot see the wind but we can see its effects, so we cannot view or measure our readiness but we can see evidence of it in our virtues, our confidence, our belief that we have spiritual help. 2 Peter says, “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness” (1:3). Does that ring true for you? Think for a moment on life’s twists and turns: all those things you worried about—and then that suddenly seemed to work themselves out. If you know that God is providing you with spiritual power, then you are ready for the wedding of the Son. Your spiritual hope is your wedding garment. Your heartfelt loyalty to the Son is your wedding garment. So you will come to the banquet clothed in spiritual light. Knowing that you *belong* in this celebration, you are cloaked in spiritual joy. Your soul emanates a beautiful spiritual fragrance!

Some parts of this parable have an ominous tone, but if you interpret the parable in light of the *whole* gospel, it is a message of hope as well as seriousness. We are invited to the banquet of the Son. All we have to do is reverently accept that invitation, and we can confidently say “he leads me beside still waters. . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (Ps 23:2, 6). Mercy will follow me all the days of my afterlife, as well, where the banquet goes on, where the kingdom is eternal, and where we will be offered opportunities for worship and service in the family of God. Welcome to the banquet of the Son!

Be full of joy. Let your Spirit fill you with hope.