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Providence Presbyterian Church
Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 11, 2026
Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

"THE Invitation"

My most memorable birthday party as a child was my tenth birthday. Mom and Dad had asked me what I wanted to do and I told them that I wanted to take my friends to "Playland Park" in Houston. I invited only boys - it never would have occurred to me to invite girls - they had "cooties."

There were about eight guys, ranging in age from 8 to 12, with whom I regularly played in my neighborhood. My sisters helped me with the invitations and I delivered them to my friends. No one would have dreamed of passing up an invitation to "Playland Park," so everyone I had invited was there, ready to party. My sisters and my mother were the chaperones for the party and I believe they had at least as good a time as us guys.

We ate cotton candy, candy apples, Cracker Jacks, and popcorn. We rode every ride available, most of them two or three times, which didn't always mix well with all the stuff we were eating, if you know what I mean.

The ride that left a lasting impression on me was the "Bumper Cars." My sister, Carol who was in college at the time, spotted a cute sailor to bump, which she did, promptly knocking off his hat. Then my sister, Pat, also in college, came to the sailor's rescue, saying, "I'll get your hat." As Pat leaned out of the bumper car to retrieve the sailor's cap, she learned why they are called bumper cars. Someone bumped her car, propelling it right over the top of the poor sailor's cap. Several other cars followed suit until my sister Carol was able to pick up the grease-streaked cap, which in no way resembled the dazzling white cap the sailor had once worn. By the time my sisters returned the cap to the sailor, they were laughing so hard that well you can use your imagination to draw your own conclusion.

It was a hilarious birthday party and one of the best parties I have ever had. Everyone said that they wouldn't have missed it for anything. We all love a party. There's something about receiving a party invitation that stirs our blood and increases our excitement. Generally, most of us will clear our calendars for a party.

So, it is difficult to understand why the first ones invited to the king's party in Jesus' parable refused to attend. But refuse, they did. Even when the king sent more messengers

to call those invited to come to the party, they dismissed the invitation as something insignificant. Not only that, but they also killed the messengers. The king was so infuriated with this contemptible behavior that he sent his army to destroy those ungrateful citizens. Then the king sent his servants to the highways and byways to invite everyone they met, both good and bad, to the wedding feast.

They came and the great hall was filled with people of every sort. When the king made his grand entrance, he saw that everyone was attired properly for the wedding - everyone except one man. Everyone else had managed to clothe themselves appropriately except this man who, when the king asked why he had failed to change, was simply speechless. However, the king knew exactly what to say: "Toss him into the outer darkness."

For having such a promising beginning, the parable certainly concludes on a sobering note. What's going on here? Well, let's see if we can unpack the context of the parable.

To better understand this parable, we need to understand the significance of weddings in Jesus' day. First of all, weddings were expected to involve the whole village. It wasn't a matter of inviting some but not others. Invitations went out way in advance to everyone and everyone accepted and planned to attend. When the wedding feast was officially ready the final invitation went out to come immediately.

Secondly, weddings were not a few hours like they are today; wedding celebrations lasted 5-7 days beginning with a nighttime lantern procession where the groom goes to retrieve his bride from her home. Thirdly, all wedding guests were expected to wear clean, appropriate festive attire; that's what the parable refers to as a wedding robe, although it could be any type of festive garments. Fourthly, the hosts frequently supplied free wedding garments free of charge so that no one had any excuse for not dressing appropriately. To show up without wearing even the free wedding garment would be a major sign of disrespect.

Based on this knowledge then we can summarize the parable this way. The king, who represents God, invites the whole town, which represents the Israelites. They accepted the original invitation but when it came time to attend, they rejected the invitation as a show of ultimate disrespect. The king punished them for their rejection. Then the king invited all who were not the insiders, both good and bad, to attend. Everyone showed up either with their own wedding garments or wore those garments provided for them, all except this one lone man. His disrespect was profound and the king cast him out of the party. The parable ends with "For many are called but few are chosen," which means that while the invitation to follow Jesus is open to everyone, we still have responsibilities to be faithful when we accept that invitation.

The religious leaders assumed that because they were part of the chosen people, they could simply do as they pleased. They were the “insiders,” who felt so confident of their position in the kingdom that they took it for granted that they would always be an insider. They grew lax in their relationship with God because they followed the rules – and they really knew how to follow all the rules. The problem with that was that they trusted their own abilities to save them rather than trusting God.

Thus, trusting their own way of doing things rather than the king’s way, they joined Jesus’ long list, growing longer with each parable, of “right” people who end up “wrong,” - winners who lose. They are the Pharisee in the temple congratulating himself on what a religious success he is; they are the older brother pouting in the darkness because he’s too good to go into the party thrown in his brother’s honor; they are the son who said “yes,” and did “nothing” they are the wicked tenants who thought they could inherit what belonged to their Lord. Sometimes, they are you and me. They are any of us who believe that our good deeds and good credentials are enough to get us into the King’s party.

I think Jesus portrays the king’s response in the parable so abrupt and harsh to convince us that we are wrong, dead wrong, if we trust either ourselves and our goodness to get us out of the consequences of rejecting the king’s invitation. A great deal is at stake here. It is life and death. Salvation is not by works. The king’s feast is not an option, if we wish to live - really live. We are saved only by our acceptance of the invitation to a party already in progress - a party paid for by the death of his own Son. This is a party open not only to former “insiders,” but also to supposed “outsiders.”

The king sent his servants into the streets to invite both bad and good to the party. God goes out of his way to make winners of life’s losers. You see, bad people are not the problem in this kingdom, since God took care of the problem of “bad” at the cross. The problem in this kingdom is non-acceptance of the invitation given to both the undeniably bad and the allegedly good.

God doesn’t invite the good and snub the bad. He invites all. (“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”) He includes all. That’s the nature of His grace. If some are excluded, it is by their choice, not His.

Now that the great hall is filled with good folks and bad folks ready to party, the king confronts this poor fellow who isn’t wearing the proper attire and has him thrown out of the party.

Why does Jesus include this detail in what is an otherwise gracious parable of God’s inclusiveness? Perhaps it is there to remind us that there are consequences for our decisions. We are free to come or not to come. We are free to run our lives pretty much as

we choose. But there are consequences, and the consequences are great and can be severe.

At the wedding feast, somehow all the others pulled in off the streets managed to get appropriately attired. This man rejected The King by his unwillingness to change; his unwillingness to repent; his unwillingness to reverse the direction of his life. This party is not some insignificant matter; it is a matter of life and death.

Jesus tells this story to remind us that the Kingdom of God is the central question of our lives. This kingdom of God, our relationship with the Holy One, our response to the grace of God and how we live in obedience to that love and grace is the most important thing in our lives, although you might never guess it by the amount of time we spend on our relationship with God. The Kingdom of God and our decision to accept the invitation into the party is the central life-deciding issue for all of us.

The man without the wedding garment had been told to come for a wedding and he apparently refused to participate appropriately. We are all invited to the party of the kingdom of God. Accepting that invitation is the most important decision we will ever make. And if we come, we have to come prepared to be a part of the kingdom, to behave appropriately for the party.

If my friends had come to my 10th birthday party wearing suit and tie it would have been obvious that they didn't intend to participate in the fun and games. Have we come to the party expecting to participate or simply observe? The kingdom of God is the most important party of our lives. It is no casual come and go affair. It is a life-or-death party.

It makes a difference whether we come or not, how prepared we are for the party and how obedient we are at the party. It makes a difference because this is not just any invitation. This is THE invitation of our lives.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen