

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Year A October 15 2023

Readings

Is 25:6-10a

Ps 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6

Phil 4:12-14, 19-20

Mt 22:1-14

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All of us have received invitations, both formal and informal: an anniversary, a house-warming, a graduation. Among these have undoubtedly been unwelcome invitations: a birthday party at the same time as an important football game, a wedding that conflicts with our annual trip to the shore, a retirement party for a coworker we really never cared for, a barbecue with neighbors who always serve cheap beer. As a result, most of us know the struggle to escape, the search for the perfect excuse. Effective excuse-making – stretching this truth, nudging that fact, matching the right explanation to the particular occasion – this is a delicate art form, requiring planning and rehearsal. Not every cover story is plausible. Not every alibi works for every audience.

“Sorry, I’m going out of town this weekend” may get you out of the anniversary party, but it won’t work when your next-door-neighbors look across the fence, see you watching the Eagles playing the Cowboys on your big screen t.v., and yell out, “Hey, come on over! We’re grilling some veggie-burgers.”

A short note to a reunion committee explaining how you much you’d love to attend, but the flesh-eating bacteria bedeviling you is still in its contagious stage...well, that may gain the sympathy of your high school classmates, but it just won’t work for Thanksgiving dinner with the in-laws.

But one thing is certain: Whatever ruses we have employed, whatever pretexts we have forged, it never occurred to any of us to get out of a block party or a baby shower by killing the messenger. No one here ever shot the mailman because he delivered an invitation to a college graduation that conflicted with a golf game. No one here ever blew up a phone company's headquarters because the school secretary called and asked you to chaperone the 8th grade field trip to Washington, D.C., when you were looking forward to some peace and quiet because your child was going to be away on the 8th grade field trip to Washington, D.C. However inconvenient the day or distasteful the company, no one here has ever killed the messenger.

But the people in today's gospel do. "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come.... Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them." Why? Why kill the messenger? For that matter, why is the invitation unwelcome? Why would anyone want to go to a farm rather than a palace, why would anyone want to go to work instead of a feast? A party with the king means "a feast of rich food and choice wines," music and dancing and laughter. What's not to like?

The answer, I think, is found at the end of the story. One man accepts the invitation, but comes dressed not for a royal reception, but for a day on the farm, a trip to the beach, for an afternoon mowing the lawn or working on the car. The invitation is free, but in return the king expects his guests to show respect, to dress properly, to act grateful to be at the palace. Yes, the unexpected invitation may require a trip home and back, perhaps even a long one. But it will be worth it! For a sumptuous feast, top shelf liquor, and a great band – is it truly too much to ask that the guests wear something suitable, even if its only a clean shirt, polished shoes, maybe a

tie? Nothing bespoke, nothing imported, nothing brand new. Just something a little special. But the man in the parable can not even manage that.

Both those who refuse the invitation and the man who accepts it share the same blindness. Here is something joyful, something worth breaking routines and worth a trip for proper clothing, but they cannot be bothered. The first-invited can't see past their own plans, and one of the second-invited cannot see past his own convenience. The first-invited offer no polite regrets, and the second-invited undertakes no preparation. The king is having a feast but their lives must proceed according to their timetables and their comfort.

But why kill the messengers? It's an absurd, grotesque over-reaction! The first-invited are Jesus' warning to us that we can be so enslaved to our sins that we would rather ignore his call and risk damnation than change our ways. Why would anyone want to persist in adultery, persevere in cruel humor, and fail to show mercy rather than gladly accept the invitation to lift up our hearts and give the King thanks and receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ himself? Blasphemy, drunkenness, pornography; gossip, rage, ignorance; vanity, lust, and greed: rather than give these up, we happily starve our souls. Every Catholic church contains a crucifix to remind us of how our race once responded to the unwelcome call to conversion *and* to remind us of how we continue to do so now by our indifference to this feast. How many family members, friends, and neighbors turn down the invitation, Catholics whose full schedule of weekend pleasures and projects must not be interrupted even for the offer of eternal life?

How many times have we here now accepted the invitation but found the basic preparation of regular confession and acts of mercy too inconvenient? How many times have we eaten thoughtlessly, giving the Host no honor, showing the King no gratitude, sparing no thought to visiting the sick, comforting the sorrowful, and guiding the lost. We want the food, we want the

joy of the celebration, but all on our own terms. Towards us, Christ directs an image of staggering selfishness: A man comes to eat and drink at the house of the king, and cannot be bothered to change his clothes. He is rightly ashamed to have no excuse. He makes no answer to the king's question. What about us?

Do we recognize where we are?

Do we love what we have come to receive?

Have we taken care to be ready and made plans to thank the Host properly?