

## If Only They had Eloped....

[Text - Matthew 22:1-14]

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Today's New Testament Reading has an upbeat beginning. Jesus says, "The Divine Realm may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call all those who had been invited, to come to the banquet!" Beautiful! A gracious invitation to a joyous event; *and* a thoughtful follow-up call. Yet suddenly, everything goes wrong. Those who have been invited, say that they're not going to come! So the king sends others servants, to implore them to attend. And then, the real trouble begins. Excuses are made, servants are mistreated, and some are even *killed*. So the king sends troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city to the ground!

Of course, this story isn't about an invitation to a wedding banquet - it's about the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm. The Hebrew people, throughout their history, have believed that they are called to be active participants in the Holy One's redemptive work in this world. Unfortunately, some of them figure that this invitation to participate means that they are somehow morally superior to other people, and that the Holy One loves *them* more than those "others". Even within their own nation, certain individuals and groups feel that they are more virtuous than others; and that they can treat those less-virtuous *others* as being less-important to the Holy One. However, throughout their history, whenever people *are* mistreated or oppressed, the Holy One raises-up *prophets* - people who proclaim the Divine Call for compassion, equality and justice. And like the servants in Jesus' parable, many of those prophets are also mistreated, and some of them are even killed; yet the Holy One's gracious invitation will not be stopped.

In Jesus' day, there's an extremely sharp divide between Israel's religious leadership and the "common" people. The intricate interpretations of Hebrew Law had become so complex, that many people simply relinquish anything "religious" to the "experts". Yet many of these so-called religious experts are so caught-up in their [often] self-serving and lucrative rules and rituals, that they have little time or desire to help the poor and the oppressed - which supposedly is what their religion is all about! Even

worse, these leaders don't just ignore people in need, they also dismiss them as being unfit for the Divine Realm.

Like today's "Prosperity Preachers" they figure, "If you're poor, or sick, or downtrodden, then God really must not care for you - certainly not as much as God cares for us righteous [and richer] individuals!" And it's because these pious people see themselves as having an exclusive, inside invitation to the Divine Realm, that Jesus tells this parable to drive home two critically important points: First, that *everyone* is invited to participate and celebrate within the Divine Realm. And second, that the only ones who can be excluded from that Holy Realm, are those who would exclude themselves.

A king sends a special invitation to people who he believes would *want* to come to the wedding feast - to all those who already have a connection to the royal family. Yet many of those who have that connection - who hold in their hands that personal invitation - chose to not join in the celebration. They "make light of it, and go on their way." They have their own lucrative business to attend, which in their minds supersedes their relationship to the king. Many of them even turn against the royal messengers, mistreat them, and kill them! Now that's a terribly harsh response to a gracious invitation! Yet beyond that, those who think they have this unique, inside connection, obstinately resist the idea of anyone else being included! So Jesus tells this parable to let those religious "insiders" know - that regardless of their rejection - the invitation continues to go-forth. In fact, it extends to the poor, the sick and the lowly - even to those who are viewed as being "morally inferior *outsiders!*"

Throughout his ministry, Jesus passionately proclaims that the invitation to participate in the Divine Realm is for *all* people, whoever and wherever they may be! He also reveals, that the only people who *can* be excluded, are those who would exclude themselves - by categorically rejecting the invitation, and stubbornly refusing to be part of an expansive, eclectic, and joyful community. And in this morning's parable, Jesus gives us a picture of how this kind of self-exclusion might happen.

In First Century Israel, when guests arrive at a wedding banquet, they're given the opportunity to freshen-up from their journey, and to put on a special wedding robe which the host provides. This is how those poor, last-minute invitees can be nicely dressed; and why the king can immediately spot that one person who is *not* dressed for the occasion. It appears as if

this individual simply can't stand the idea of dressing like all those lowly and "sinful" people around him.

Yet in spite of his refusal to associate with those "inferior others", the king still gives this guy a chance to make amends. He cordially says to him "*Friend...how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*" But the man says *nothing!* Had he asked forgiveness for his condescending attitude and stubborn pride, his story could have a happy ending. But the fact that he doesn't even respond to the king's gracious invitation to redeem the situation, shows that he really doesn't want to be part of this diverse and inclusive celebration; so he is unceremoniously ejected "into the outer darkness".

People often wonder, "How can a God of overwhelming love, ever condemn *anyone* to a place of eternal darkness and torment?" According to Jesus, *God does not!* Rather, it is those deliberate choices people make - day after day, year after year - that eventually closes their minds, hardens their hearts, and eradicates any desire to ever associate with those "unacceptable" people who they have spent a lifetime learning to fear and hate. They become immovably resolute in their position, saying basically "If God is going to let *those* kind of people in, then count me out! I'd rather suffer in my own dark delusion, than acknowledge the value of others and admit the error of my ways."

The invitation to participate in the Divine Realm is extended to *everyone*; therefore the only ones who can be excluded, are those who exclude themselves. Now, whether or not this practice of stubbornly separating ourselves from all those people we don't like, is permanently projected into Eternity, is really beside the point.

*Today* is the day you and I must decide that we will not exclude others, because they're different from us.

*Anytime* we see people being oppressed or abused because of their race or religion, gender or social status - is the moment we must choose to speak-out and take action on their behalf.

*Whenever* an opportunity arises for you and me to graciously welcome others to join in the celebration of Divine Life and Love, is the perfect time for you and I to make it so!

And if we are really concerned about “Eternity”, then we’ll remember that the Present Moment is the only point in Eternity in which you and I actually live, and can make a difference. The past is past; the future is undeterminable. So let us strive do our absolute *best* to make the absolute *most* of the here and now. And let’s all join together as One, to celebrate Life’s Beautiful Banquet!