

Did you get your invitation? I know that sounds like one of those questions where the person asking already has an answer in mind, like: “Do I have to eat my beets?” or a question that really has no answer at all, like: “How do you solve a problem like Maria?” or a question that maybe has an answer that you can’t actually say, like: “Do these pants make me look fat?” But I ask the question sincerely: “Did you get your invitation?” Or maybe the better way to ask it is, “Which invitation did you get?” Because we all got one. Everyone did. It’s God’s standing invitation to everyone ever born.

Many of us got the first kind of invitation—the one given to those of us who have all the appearances of the necessary qualifications by virtue of our baptism. The first kind of invitation is to those of us baptized churchgoers to enter more deeply into the mystery of God’s eternal banquet—that royal banquet of eternal life that presents hints and foretastes of itself here in this place at this table in this community.

We are invited to realign our lives with the yearning that God has placed within the heart of each of us. Invited to remember that our minds, bodies, relationships and possessions—all that we are and have—belong rightfully to God and are to be treated with respect as though they were the vessels of the altar—vessels of grace. Invited into silence when we want to speak bitter words. Invited to speak when we witness injustice, even if that makes us uncomfortable. When I say to God in those moments, “You’ll have to excuse me, I’m busy” and I have said that more often than I’d like to admit, I am essentially saying, “Hold me excused, even if it means that I am refusing to come deeper into relationship with the God who loves me totally and radically.” That deeper, living relationship with God may appear to pass me by only to emerge in people around me or, more often, in those aspects of myself that I judge to be less Godly or more sinful.

And so there is the second kind of invitation. This is an invitation that we should all recognize because it is the invitation to everyone who was not invited the first time, good or bad, pious or unchurched—everyone that the king’s servants encountered, until the hall was filled with guests. Now, I haven’t forgotten that some of those first invited in Jesus’ parable acted quite poorly—even violently. Nor have I forgotten that the king in the parable responded even more violently, by destroying the city and calling the first

intended guests “unworthy.” In particular, I have not overlooked the one guest thrown out, but before I address any of that, let me ask you two more questions—and these are questions that I ask with my own answer in mind: “Does this king sound like a deeply loving God? Or does this king sound a lot more like an earthly king, maybe even Herod or Nero?”

In the beginning of our Gospel reading, Jesus is speaking to the same chief priests, elders and scribes, and by extension, the Pharisees, that he spoke to in our Gospel last week. He starts this parable with a phrase worth noting: “The Kingdom of heaven *may be* compared to...” That is different than the opening of the parable he gave last week—an opening that made a more direct comparison. Jesus started that parable with, “The kingdom of heaven *is like*...” I wonder if he’s setting his listeners up for a slight correction: “The Kingdom of heaven *may be* compared to a king...”

The violence and exclusion in the parable indicate a fork in the road. Where an earthly king might respond to unexpected human behavior with vengeance and retribution, God responds with new life. In my own experience, when I excuse myself by saying to God, “I’m too busy, I have chores to do,” God has never abandoned me as unworthy. And if there is any form of violence, it has only ever come in the cutting away of my attachments to material things, status or my own unyielding perspectives—anything that I have put in a place that is rightfully God’s. The invitation from an earthly king might be delivered in great splendor and pomp using clear and unambiguous language, but the invitations from God happen most often in the depths of our awareness or in incidental encounters with each other or the natural world.

Where an enraged earthly king might destroy the city I live in, a slighted God responds, instead, with another invitation. Where an earthly king fixated on honor and popularity might be coldly calculating as to who is in and who is out, God begins by accepting absolutely everyone before even issuing the invitations. And where a self-important earthly king might toss an inappropriately dressed guest into a dark pit of despair, God behaves very differently.

Jesus’ audience might well have been puzzled by the king’s response to the man without a robe, especially as it seems most likely that he came with the second group and was, by definition, not a peer or even connected with the king’s circle of associates. Social customs would have dictated that the king supply a robe to those who traveled or who, for whatever other reason, could not supply their own. And so the king’s vindictive and disproportionate reaction to the man is perplexing.

The kingdom of heaven may *fruitfully* be compared to this king if and only if we pay close attention to the differences. “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” This is not a question asked with an answer in mind nor is it a question that is unanswerable or that leads only to answers too upsetting to speak. Not for God. *Any* answer would satisfy God: an angry response, an ashamed response, an indignant response, an ignorant response, tears, laughter, dancing, more questions, a smile, *anything*—any answer at all—because to answer *at all* is to acknowledge relationship—to be in relationship with God. To choose not to be in relationship with God—to freely *choose* not to be in relationship with God—is a choice for the deepest despair.

Even the phrase “many are called, but few are chosen” takes on an exclusive tone with potential for violence for an earthly king. But for God, having *already chosen everyone*, the phrase might be better turned as “all are called, but only a handful can move passed their suspicions, desires and attachments to simply accept God’s freely and lavishly given grace.” Regardless of whether we are qualified or unqualified, if we are willing to accept *some* kind of relationship with God, the invitation is *always* extended. Did you get yours?