

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
The First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Have you ever crashed a party before? About 40 years ago in seminary days, I visited my college roommate who went on to Boston College Law School. We strolled Boston's Back Bay with more high spirits than cash in our pockets. We happened by a grand, stately hotel, peering through tall windows and brocaded draperies. A reception was in full swing. Elegantly dressed people were hobnobbing, having a generally wonderful time. "That looks like fun," Steve observed. "Let's go in." That flustered me. "Do you *know* any of these people?" I asked leadingly. "Why, of course not," he grinned. "Is that so important?" "I always thought it was," I said, "but maybe not." Then I just trailed along in Steve's wake.

We looked scruffy; the real guests were sleek and polished. Trying to blend in, we helped ourselves to food and drink. Steve smiled and amiably chatted up those around him as though he'd known them his entire life. Surprisingly, Steve is actually quite shy. I guess you have to watch the quiet ones, don't you? I just followed his schmoozing lead. And at the first sign of a lifted eyebrow, Steve acted so hurt, "You don't remember me do you?" Beating a hasty retreat back into the street, we felt flushed with heady, roguish success.

Today's parable today is about the eminently crashable party God is throwing. It is a party welcoming all kinds of guests. It is a party whose invitation is ignored at our own peril. The kingdom of heaven is like the outpouring of joy and gladness at a wedding party, Jesus begins. And the king throwing this party, the Lord God, wants everyone there. Isn't that always the mark of the deepest joy: wanting it in all directions for everyone possible?

Anyway, this king, God Almighty, sends out his servants eager to share his glad invitation. But the guests respond indifferently. One said he couldn't come because he needed to sift through his old emails and delete some that night. Another said she would like to go, but couldn't miss Game of Thrones. Another guest, a bishop, announced that because the party was on a Saturday night, she couldn't go. She had to get up early on Sunday. Despite featuring generous helpings of unconditional positive regard, dying love, and free grace, Jesus says, some fail to recognize a good thing as they see it. What fools we are!

But Jesus is just getting warmed up. For this king, undaunted in his desire to throw a bash for his son, sends out more servants to procure guests. "They must not understand. Tell them I'm flying in king crab from Alaska. Tell them the wine is vintage French champagne. Tell them I have flown in chefs from Italy. Tell them the mousse is served in swan-shaped pastries." Not only do the invitees mock the party, they attack the servant. Not only do they skip their fashionably late appearance, they kill the courier with engraved invitations.

Now the king is angry. Boy, and how! The king doesn't merely react with the country club snub of crossing them off his guest list for the future. It gets real ugly. "He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city." That is what I call one mightily spurned host! But before you judge this monarch, consider how the guests mocked his invitation. They preferred their own devices. There were comfortable within their own eccentricities,

their own agenda, their own company, and the happiness they had found for themselves, thank you very much. And so, trusting their own way rather than the king's way, they join Jesus' long and growing list of right people who end up wrong. Of winners become losers.

Who else is on the list? The gospels teem with them. The praying Pharisee strutting through the temple, pleases with his righteousness; the older brother pouting in the dark barnyard shed, unwilling to party with his prodigal younger brother; the conscientious people who went ballistic as a sinful woman sat by Jesus at dinner, let down her hair, and made a fuss over him. Honestly, this list could potentially include the likes of you and me.

Those who spurn the king are all who assume that our status, good grooming, and steady job are enough to gain us entry into the king's palace whenever we feel moved to stop by. And that the king is so soft-headed he doesn't care, so blandly tolerant he doesn't notice. Any invitation to rejoice by its nature has terms to which we must submit to enter that joy.

Jesus warns us that we are deluded if all of our trust is in our own goodness or the king's patience to clear us from ignoring or rejecting the king's invitation. Jesus alerts us that much is at stake here. Even life or death weigh in the balance. How does salvation come to us? Not by resting in the glow of who we already are or what we already do. *It is about attending a party already in progress, whose joy was made possible by sacrifice that we can barely conceive.* Such invitations can never be neutral. They aren't to be sneezed at. So God works by the free gift of grace, but also expects our trust and willingness in faith.

When the first invitations are not filled, the king moves on to Plan B. He sent his servants out to invite whomever would come, the good and the bad, the revered and the deprived. We who are winners as the world sees it should take note that Jesus goes out of his way to make winners out of life's losers. Throughout the Gospels, God's reign advances as often despite so-called good people as because of them. Bad people are no longer the insurmountable obstacle they seem because of what happened at the cross and beyond.

The real problem is not how good or bad we are--since God already knows all about that. The king doesn't invite the good and snub the bad. He invites all. *The real problem is non-acceptance of the invitation given both to the undeniably bad and the allegedly good.* So who ends up there? Some hungry and frayed grad students, like those wandering the streets of Back Bay. Some old men with Ripple on their breath. Some people like those seated around you. The point is, as Jesus says, "The wedding hall was filled with guests." And the king's joy was made complete. That is, except for one street person who wouldn't clean up his act, even as the king made his royal shower and a tuxedo available.

What is the point of this dingy street person? All the king ever wanted was a party with eager people. As far as the king is concerned, everyone is welcome, everybody is in, so long as we accept the invitation. What rankles and goads the king is our apathy given the trouble he went to. So, for the king, the only ones cast out are those unwilling to be inside. "Judgment falls down like a thundering gavel upon our rejection of the invitation," writes

William Willimon. "Hell is where we are when we will not accept our own acceptance. . ."

The parable is powerful because a gracious inclusiveness is at work here, inviting and embracing far beyond how the world measures who is worthy to come in and who is not. But a no-nonsense irascibility is also present reminding us that invitations spurned are not without consequence, that worthy opportunities cannot be forced upon us—even by God. Grace intrudes, but also judgment. It is free and inviting, but also serious and demanding.

When you think about it, there is almost nothing that God cannot use. God can use a great fish of the sea to deliver Jonah. God can use a lowly manger where cattle feed to house his newborn Son. God can use an instrument of mass execution—the Cross—to redeem the world and to point to the hope awaiting us beyond our struggle. But there is one thing, Jesus teaches here, that God cannot use. It is our complacency. Indifference. It is probably better to be angry at God or disgusted with God, than apathetic toward God.

Invitations are by their nature fraught with risk. Opportunities yield good and evil but rarely result in something neutral. They beg to be filled. They *are* filled---with bane or with blessing. I tell you, the party of God's reign is no casual affair. Such a party is serious business.

Implicitly, you already understand this, if you have invited close and beloved friends, say, to your daughter's wedding, and they never even responded, let alone skipping it entirely. Wherever a bright light shines, we know it will always cast deep and dark shadows. And invitation into relationship with God in Christ through faith is about the very brightest light.

Garrison Keillor nicely sizes this up. "I've heard a lot of sermons in the past ten years that make me want to get up and walk out. They're secular, psychological, self-help sermons. Friendly, but of no use. They didn't make you straighten up. They didn't give you anything hard." He's right, in a world where we take the most essential things for granted, we need to hear God's hard word naming our resistance and self-deception, a word that causes us to straighten up and do better. This is not a scold, for I stand under the same judgment.

We hope you hear FCC lifting up God's love front and center. But saying "God loves you," over and over, and saying only that eventually dulls our spiritual edge, even as centrally as God's love figures. Now and again, we also need to hear, "God loves you so much he expects something better from you." That takes good news to new depths. As Gary says of himself, there is grace and there is truth, and he has grown far more by hearing truth.

Did you hear of the lady and her lavish dinner party? Everyone was seated and they were ready to share the delicious repast. The mother turned to her six year old, "Would you say the blessing, dear?" "I don't know what to say," she replied. "Just say what you hear mummy say." The girl bowed and said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people?"

At times I wonder how often God feels that way about the spoiled children of humankind.

Do we ever ask how God feels? This parable does. Did you ever think God's feelings outrank our own? That is heresy within a narcissistic world but essential to our salvation. Amen.