

10/9/2005

PENTECOST 21

Matthew 22:1-14, A #23

I LOVE today's gospel ... don't you? If you love to party, you should, for the imagery of Jesus' parable tells us that you and I have been created to party with God forever, like a bride with her bridegroom. What a hoot! Heaven is an unending bash. But it is one for which you and I are not yet capable, because it's going to take REAL party animals to be up to the heavenly feast.

We aren't talking here of a "low-down, stinking-drunk, loud-mouthed, wake-up-the-next-morning-wishing-you-had-amnesia-so-you-could-forget-the-night-before" kind of wing-ding. NO. We're talking about the very best kind of party. The kind where the food is delectable, the wine is superb, the music is wonderful, the company is scintillating (even your own), the conversation brilliant (even your own), and your host treats you royally, as if you were someone absolutely *extraordinaire*. Because you see, to him you really are; he treasures your company ... he thinks you're so wonderful he could eat you with a spoon ... and he is so glad that you made it to his fete. NOW, that kind of wing-ding would be heaven, wouldn't it? You bet!

BUT, to attend and enjoy any party, there are several things necessary, aren't there? At least three:

1. You have to be invited.
2. You must accept the invitation.
3. You must prepare yourself for the party.

And so it is with God's party.

First, you must receive an invitation. **No problem here!** That's part of the joy of today's gospel message: **everybody's** invited to God's blast. It's for you ... for you ... even for me. My goodness, that's enough to make you start speaking in tongues, isn't it?!

Second, you have to accept the invitation. Now, this is where it gets a little bit tricky. You must notify the host whether or not you're coming. Even though the party is being given for you, it is ungracious, rude not to R.S.V.P. That means, "please respond." And then, of course, if you've accepted the invitation, it's rude and crude to let other things get in the way.

In Jesus' parable, the first invitees failed on both counts, didn't they? For whatever reasons, they thought they had better things to do. Lordy, some of them even got down right tacky about the king's begging them to come: they beat up on his messengers, and even terminated some.

Yep, this is just the sort of thing our Jewish forebears had been doing for too long to too many of the prophets the Lord sent them to invite them to his feast. And this is just the sort of thing too many of us do to those messages and messengers the Lord sends us, particularly those that call us to straighten up and get our act together so we can become fit for the heavenly feast.

Such messages might come through, such messengers might be, the circumstances of our lives, or

our spouses, our friends, even strangers, even those we think our enemies. If we don't like the message in our inbox, we quickly punch delete. And if we don't like the messenger ... well, watch out, sucker! Yep, just like the invitees in Jesus' parable did to the inviters.

But I ask you: Did that stop the party? Did it? NO WAY! The host was determined that his toot was going to come off. You see, he's a fellow who loves a good time. And he isn't going to be deprived of it. So, he just sent his people out to invite others.

There's a warning here for us, don't you think? **With** you and me OR **without** you and me, God's party is going to come off. You and I can either accept the invitation and do what we need to do to get ready for the fete, or not. Whatever we choose, the party is still going to come off. And anybody with any sense knows that God's party is the only one in town to be at. That other one – at the infinitely other end of eternity, is a fiendish nightmare of stinking-drunk, loud-mouthed, beating-up-on-one-another misery. It's HELL! But it's ours to decide which toot we want.

Now, our acceptance of God's invitation began for each of us at our baptism. Mark my word: I said it **began**. Because, you see, in case you didn't know, the acceptance of any invitation is not a one-shot deal. Actually, it is a process of sticking with one's acceptance. You do this by turning down any other invitations that come later and by letting nothing over which you have control, get in the way of your showing-up.

So, our "yes" to God's invitation to his eternal blast is not accepted in a moment and then put aside. It requires continuous re-commitment and updating. It's like the "I do" in marriage. That "I do" spoken on the day of the sacrament's celebration is not the end of a process, but the beginning of one. The "I do" must be reaffirmed every day, as you say "yes" to everything that will help your marriage grow richer and richer and "no" to whatever would tear it down.

Which brings us to the third thing necessary for attending and enjoying any party: We must not only be invited, we must not only accept the invitation; we must also prepare ourselves for the feast. Indeed, the best parties are always those for which you have to prepare, for which you have to make some measure of sacrifice and putting-out of yourself. At the least, clean up, comb your hair, brush your teeth, maybe splash on some cologne. Your preparation, you see, is an investment in the fun. And it helps open you up both to receive and give enjoyment to others.

Did you notice the man in Jesus' parable who got tossed out of the party because he didn't wear his wedding garment? Let me explain this to you. Everybody in first century Palestine had a wedding garment. It wasn't *just* for weddings; and it didn't have to be fancy or expensive. But it **was** kept in good order, clean and smelling good ... kind of like "Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes."

Well, this character in the parable comes in his work clothes, typically filthy and stinko. It wasn't that he didn't have proper attire. He just didn't care enough to get himself cleaned up and

dressed up. Which means that he did not value either the host or the host's generosity in inviting him. He was a presumptuous, ungrateful, self-centered pip.

You've met people like that at parties, haven't you? I've had to endure enough of them. Perhaps you and I have even been one. Can't put ourselves out to contribute to the fun and make it special for others ... only interested in gorging ourselves with the free booze, the big feed, and getting out of having to put ourselves out for anyone else. *Obnoxious jackasses!*

Once more we are to take note and warning. God's party ain't no cheap bash; and the host ain't trash. It's the best one to which you'll ever get an invitation. So you and I have got to learn how to act right, put our best foot forward, how to talk well, how to dance smooth, how to be clean and cool. In a word, you and I have got to become holy.

All this stuff about holiness which the Church is always jabbering away at us about ... **all this stuff** about the necessity of worship being at the center of your life, and growing in your knowledge and living of the Faith and sacrificing the time, talents and treasure God has given you to his glory and the good of his Church and his world ... **all this stuff** about repenting of your sins and doing everything you can to get close to Jesus and to become his faithful disciple ... **ALL THIS STUFF** has one and only one end in view: to make you into a great party animal, a **saint**. Someone capable both of giving joy *to* and receiving joy *from* God and others forever.

FOREVER. That is a BIG word for a long time. It takes a BIG person to be up to giving and receiving joy forever. It takes someone who is integrated, completely at peace and in harmony with oneself: a **saint**. That's what God made you and me in baptism, so that by his grace and our collaboration, we can become it. By the disciplines of Christ conveyed to us by his Church, we, by God, can become it ... IF we want to and are willing to put out the effort.

Here is the stupendous thing: the host of the Great Party himself is ready, willing, and able to help us get ready for his feast. So, HOW CAN WE LOSE? Only by our own ungrateful stubbornness in refusing to do what we need to do to get ready, with his help, for his fete.