

What became of Civility? - Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

This scripture is one of those sad stories about people forgetting everything mom and grand mom taught them about manners and civility. There are just certain things you do, simple because they are the polite and right things to do. Sometimes we were taught things as children just because they would help grease the wheels for us later in life.

The first time you meet someone you say yes sir or no mam to them. It does not matter whether they are younger or older than you, whether they are the boss of something or just some farm hand. Respect breeds respect. It is just not you who does not know them, they do not know you. By saying things in a polite manner you are seeking to open a friendly, respectful relationship. Try answering with naugh or just shaking your head, the impression you make is very different.

Joe was one of the farmers in my first congregation. Like I did with most everyone when we met the first time away from church, he seldom came but his wife was a regular, I answered him with a yes sir. It stuck in his mind and was one of the reasons he said later that he continued to have a relationship with me. Joe's family at one point shared the primary ownership of all of Osceola County with the other founding family. All of his life he had been both a farmer and a very wealthy man. Previous preachers had paid attention to his ability to help the church making regular requests at different times. Since reopening the church 15 years prior to my coming each of the previous ministers had been older men. I was fresh out of seminary in my first appointment. When they would come and ask for money they just made their case and expected him to approve.

I just came to visit without a request for funds and when I left I told him thanks for allowing me to visit. His wife was the one who told me the impression my manners had made upon him. I wish I could tell you he came to church regular. I can tell you that a few years later when his daughter was getting married he made certain that the preacher was invited to do the service and not the preacher from the big church after all the preacher from Shingle Creek was their preacher. When Joe died I did his service at his request and not just the families. There were congressman and senators and some very influential people who heard about the love of God because Joe responded to someone with manners.

It has always amazed me that this morning's story includes not just information about how God views you and I as guests to the wedding feast but how manners my momma taught me are also part of the story.

When Jesus choose to describe the Kingdom of Heaven he talks about a king throwing a wedding feast obviously in honor of a member of the family being married.

The kingdom of heaven is like a great big party. The invitation is extended to the most eligible in the land. In a real kingdom on earth that would have included the bankers, doctors, royalty, land barrons or wealthy farmers, Hollywood celebrities and noted entertainers. It would have been the cream of the crop from any and every field of endeavor. If the king really wanted to throw a great party that would be remembered for generations, the guest list would have gone down to people like shop keepers, entrepreneurs, principles in schools or maybe even a few noted preachers.

And the first group of servants sent out does go to just such people. Yes, there are the celebrities, the politically connected but what we see in the story is that they have their own things going and have no time for the king. They think of themselves as equal to the king and therefore able to just walk away without explanation.

There is a second group of people these first servants go to that should have been impressed and responded differently. But it says that seeing the servants, they beat them and killed them and took what they had. They saw the short term gain and failed to realize the true gift that was being offered. The settled for the wealth they thought the slaves possessed instead of coming to the party and being treated like the king. They too insulted the king's hospitality.

And we see the response of the king. Because of the insults, because of being ignored or shunned he exercises his right as king. He levels the city, takes the lives of every person in the town, and burns the place to the ground. That may smack as harsh to us today, but remember the king was just not king over the territory; he was king and lord over every person. While they may have experienced a measure of freedom by the divine right of kingship, they belonged to him. He could raise them to prominence or take their lives it was his choice.

But the king's party is still being planned and the guest needed to be gathered. So the king sends out a second set of slaves with invitations. But these invitations are to anyone and everyone. And we learn that in time the guests arrive.

You and I have been invited to the party. Maybe we were not the richest, the prettiest or the first one's asked. Maybe we feel like we are an afterthought, but the message of the story is that we have been asked not only asked but as was the tradition in Jesus day we are provided wedding clothes and we are expected to walk the halls as the honored guests that we are.

The wedding party is the celebration of the extended family and in the tradition of Jesus day it would last a minimum of one week. Every meal, each evening entertainment, the joyous sharing in festival and song that happened would have included us as honored guests. Our every need would be met as though we were royalty ourselves as every courtesy extended to the king would also be extended to his guests.

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It is like you and I are treated as if we were the king. Every honor would be given to us and each need before we even became away would have been provided for.

There is however one person whom the king stops at the wedding feast. Did you notice him? When all the guests finally arrive and are ushered into the great hall, the King comes to greet them. This one fellow stands out. The king notices him right away. Though everyone would have been given wedding clothes to be properly attire to honor the king and the wedding party, this one man choose not to wear his wedding robe. He wears his work clothes and in so doing he insults the king.

What was he thinking? Surely the word must have gone around. Remember those first guests who were asked to attend the wedding? They had other more important things to do. Their personal stuff was more important than the king's invitation. Some ignore the king's invitation. Some would laugh and walk away. Some even decide to take advantage of the servants who came with the invitation and they beat them and robbed them and killed them. And the king's response – he leveled the town, killing everyone in the town. All those who had refused his invitation, all those who insulted his honor were killed.

I don't know what possessed this man but when the king entered to welcome the honored guests and to begin the wedding feast and celebration, there he stood in his work clothes. Whatever made him think that the rules of civility didn't apply to him he was wrong. When he insulted the king, the king responded. He was bound and gagged and thrown into out darkness where there is anguish and gnashing of teeth.

Each one of us who has come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior have received the invitation to the wedding feast, Christ has prepared and provided the indestructible clothes required for eternity. These earthly working bodies are not going to cut it in heaven. But Christ has provided new indestructible clothes, new bodies. So our task now as guests of the king is to live lives reflecting the great honor afforded us and to live lives that honor God for all that God has done for us.

What has become of civility? Maybe part of what has been forgotten in our faith is our relationship one with another. Are we living our lives in relationship with each other in ways that honor one another and that also honor God? The invitation has gone out to everyone. Some will walk away, some will laugh at the king, some may even try to come to the wedding feast but under their own terms (they will keep on what they want).

But for those who understand, we have been given a great honor. We have the opportunity to honor the king of kings in the way we choose to live. There is room in our lives to be civil to give honor and respect to one another and most importantly to honor the king of kings in our lives.