

In Jesus' world, you invited folks to a banquet in two steps, just like in our story today. First, you sent your servant out with a kind of "save the date" thing only with no date, because you didn't really know just how long it would take to be ready, what with all the roasting of oxen and fatted calves.

Then when all was prepared, you'd send your servant again to say, "It's time, the feast is served. Come now!"

Jesus' culture was an honor-shame one, in which honor was the highest commodity and shame could be deadly. And a banquet was mostly about bringing honor to the host – the bigger and better the party, the more honor he was bring upon himself. So, in Jesus' story, the guests' first saying "yes" and then refusing to come would have been a shocking, horrible, almost unthinkable twist. His hearers would be scandalized by this behavior that would terribly shame the host.

They might have been shocked, too, by the destruction of those ungrateful guests, and the burning of their city, except But that Jesus probably didn't say that. He'd never have said something like that, and the God of his parables would never have done it. That part's Matthew, through and through, indicting the Jewish people yet again, with this violent and gruesome sentence that, in fact, had already occurred, but at Rome's hands, not God's.

But Jesus might well have told how the king, snubbed by his invited guests, shamelessly goes out to the streets to invite absolutely everybody to his banquet! That's a twist that would have knocked the socks off his listeners! This part, of course, is Jesus, through and through, what he taught, and then shamelessly did at every possible turn, feasting with everyone – Jews, pagans, sinners, women, Pharisees, foreigners, lepers, children – absolutely everyone.

I'm don't know why some people are offended by that. Why the notion that God's wide and shameless grace really is for everyone, no exclusions or qualifiers, really bothers them. But some folks seem to need certain other folks to be left out, but they're not. No one is.

You can leave yourself out. You can refuse the invitation to come in to the banquet of God's love. You can refuse that grace that would cover you like the finest robe if only you'd just put it on. You can say "no", and if you do, God won't punish you, or burn you, or "cast you into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And grace will come at you, still, hurtling toward you like a comet.

You can try getting out of its path. You can say, "I'm not worthy of it." Or "What's it gonna cost me?" Or, "Not just now." Or "Really, God, free grace? Haven't you got something I can buy, or bank, or spend, or sell, or use?" You can say "no." Because grace is so graceful, it's invitation so utterly shameless, open and free, it even lets us refuse it.

I always read this parable with a fair amount of guilty squirming and regret. Being an introvert, trapped in an extraverted persona, job, and world, I love an invitation.

The extraverted me feels honored and excited. And being a little insecure, I want to be invited to *everything*. "Sure!" I say, when asked. "Sounds fun, count me in!" But when the day arrives and it's time to get dressed and go, so often I want to stay home, stay away.

We've probably all done it, refused to come to the party because it will be boring, or I don't have the right clothes, they're not my kind of people, I won't really know anyone, I'm too busy, too tired, too depressed, too shy, too *whatever*, or, my personal favorites, they don't really want me – they had to invite me – I'm the pastor - and there'll be plenty of others there – they won't miss *me*.

So many excuses to stay away, some of them just as good as those in the parable today. The problem with excuses is that they arise entirely from the little world of my own reality, perfectly indifferent to the needs and wants of the one who's inviting. Excuses are all about me.

The invitation arises in the heart of the other, who is seeking relationship. The excuse and refusal ignore that desire, and cut off the possibility of relationship.

At its heart, this is a parable of us, and how we who are called to the feast of God's grace so often refuse to come in, sit down, and be served. God's overwhelming, undeserved, unearned generosity scares, baffles, seems to ask too much of us, and even offends us. As Robert Capon once wrote,

"Free grace, dying love, and unqualified acceptance may as well be a 15-foot crocodile, the way we respond to them. We'd sooner have a god to be fed TO, than a god to be fed BY!"

I wonder why. Why do we fear, shun, and run from this God who pursues us, who longs for guests on whom to lavish his generous love, who might even *need* us there, might even be wounded by our refusal, because what is a feast if you have to eat it alone, or if even one much-desired guest refuses to come? And what do you do with your love, when the beloved just won't accept it?

I wonder if you do that, if you run from grace. I wonder why you would. I wonder how you resist it, and what might change for you if you just let it be for you.

The bible claims it over and over: God longs for relationship, with us, as we are. Over and over, God makes us a feast, and hungers for us to come and eat...

like when God set the table with manna and quail, out in a scarce, dry wilderness; and the Psalmist's table was prepared in the presence of his enemies; and Isaiah's dreamed- of table was laid with rich marrow and well-strained wines;

and the prodigal's dinner was bubbling on the stove before he ever got to utter even a word of apology;
and Jesus, eating all the time with everyone, and telling some shaken, weary friends after Easter, "There's bread and fish here on the fire. Come and eat!"

"Come to the feast," says the God of the bible, again and again, "and let me feed you with this spilling-over love. Let me dress you with grace, and sit you down at a table spread with it."

"Oh, I can't," we say. "I shouldn't. I won't. I couldn't possibly. I'm too scared. I'm still skeptical. I'm not ready. I'm not worthy."

I don't really care, says God. Come as you are, because I want you with me. Every one of you - the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the innocent and the guilty, the humble and the haughty, you who've been faithful and you failures and fallen ones, and you, even you. Come and eat.

And when you do, you might even find yourself changed. Robed in a new way of being, clothed in a freer generosity, a deeper forgiveness, a braver heart, an easier mind, a lighter grasp, a bolder faith, a larger trust, an unshakeable joy.

Because, while it's entirely free, grace isn't cheap. We cheapen it when we don't let it change us, when we won't let it clothe us in the likeness of Jesus, and then get us up from the table and send us out for guests who haven't yet found where it's served.

"Many are called," ends the reading, "but few are chosen." That's so Matthew! But Jesus would more likely have said, "All are called, and all are chosen, but not everyone chooses their chosenness. Not everyone chooses the grace that has chosen them."

Choose it, he'd say here today. Say yes to this free but not cheap gift, this grace at whose banquet *you* are the much-desired guest. Let grace bring you in and robe you with love, sit you down in peace and feed you with abundance.

And then, let grace get you up from the table somehow different, somehow changed, and send you out for others to bring to her rich and lavish feast.

Amen.