

"Your Presence Is Requested"
Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year A
October 9, 2011
Text: Matthew 22:1-14
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"Your presence is requested . . ." That is how the invitation began. It was handsomely engraved, as though calligraphied by hand on the heavy ivory paper. The letters were printed in such a brilliant gold that they caught the reflection of the sun in the early morning hours that found me going about my usual ritual for that time of day—combing through the trash cans that line the alley of this upscale, exclusive neighborhood. "Your presence is requested . . ." As I stared for a few moments at the formal invitation, still in its envelope, I could almost imagine what it would have been like to have received it myself in the mail.

Of course the invitation wasn't sent to me. It came to the people whose garbage I was now pillaging, desperately looking for some relatively fresh food, something of value to sell, or even an article of clothing that I might be able to use for myself. It is how I try to survive in spite of being homeless, without a job, and sick much of the time. This particular neighborhood is a rather good place to go through trash cans. These people throw away more stuff than I've ever had in my life. For a street person, I make out all right most of the time, but the shelters and the soup kitchens still help a great deal.

Yeah, there's no way I would have received an invitation like this

one, to a wedding and reception. But I could just imagine what it was going to be like. The inspiring church where the service would take place would be tastefully decorated. There would be flowers everywhere and an abundance of candles. A string quartet playing Bach and Vivaldi prior to the ceremony and a luscious pipe organ for the service music.

I may be homeless, but I know about weddings. I could picture how elegant this one would be and how much it would cost. Tuxes for the groom, his attendants, the ushers, for his father as well as the bride's father. Long satin dresses of teal green with lace for the bridesmaids and maid of honor. Gorgeous new outfits for both mothers. The bride's dress would be absolutely exquisite, with more beads than even Liberace wore and with a veil that couldn't even begin to diminish the bride's radiance. Her train would extend for two rows of pews; her bouquet would seem like a whole garden of flowers; her ring would be of at least two carats.

As the minister speaks to the couple, he would remind them that what they were doing signifies the union of Christ and his Church. The wedding is a worship service, celebrating the gift of God's love through Christ, the bridegroom, for the Church, his bride. The minister would remind the congregation of the great price God has paid to make this celebration possible, the price of his only Son. That's even more than the families involved would be shelling out for this wedding.

"Your presence is requested . . ." That's how the invitation started, and it concluded by giving the details concerning the reception. It was to be at an expensive hotel ballroom. I could picture that as well. Massive flower arrangements on every table. Champagne flowing freely. An

immense buffet with a mountain of chilled shrimp, trays of finger foods, huge bowls of rich dips, and even a pasta station. A small dance band. A five layer wedding cake with Lladro figures on top. A groom's cake covered with thick chocolate shavings and surrounded by fresh strawberries dipped in chocolate. This would be a celebration for the couple, their families, and their friends to remember all their lives.

You can see why I would never receive an invitation such as this. Not in my present circumstances. No one would want a homeless street person at such a celebration. I might stink up the joint, make a mess, say something inappropriate, be an embarrassment in some way. But I would love to go to such an event, just once in my life. I would love for *my* presence to be requested. It would mean so much to me to be invited to be a part of an affair like that. It would be to me like dying and going to heaven. Watching the couple gaze into each other's eyes, watching their families smile and cry at the same time, listening to the music, smelling the flowers, tasting the food and drink, enjoying the conversation. What a joy and a privilege that would be!

But the invitation was not mine. It was meant for someone else, and so I decided to drop it back into the trash can. But just as I was about to let it go out of my hand, I noticed something—something that had not caught my attention before. The RSVP card was still in the envelope with the invitation. The people to whom the invitation was sent had not even bothered to reply. I looked at the return card. All it asked for was to check whether or not they would be coming and how many people would be in their party. How tough was that?

I couldn't believe it. The chance to go to a celebration like this,

and the people invited didn't even go to the trouble of responding. How rude, how totally inconsiderate. Why couldn't they be courteous enough to reply to the invitation? How could they make light of it in such a way? Do they get invitations like this every day? Is that it? Could it be so commonplace for them that they can simply throw it in the trash without acknowledging it in one way or another? Talk about taking things for granted!

As I sifted through some more of their garbage, I began to do some thinking. It's amazing how much all of us make light of things and take them for granted. These people are not the only ones who make that mistake. I thought to myself about what a privilege it is to vote in this country, but do we do it and do it in a responsible manner? It is a blessing to be married, but don't we often treat it more like an obligation? It is an honor to have children, but don't we act as if it is more of a burden? We have the opportunity to serve our community and local institutions, but aren't we often too busy or unwilling to give the time?

And it is a special freedom we have in this country to worship as we please, but do we approach church attendance as the precious gift it is? Week after week God invites us to attend the celebration he is giving in honor of his Son, and we often don't even bother to reply. We are invited to come, but we make light of the invitation of God and presume upon his grace whenever we fail to make an appearance.

Standing over that trash can, reading that wedding invitation, and sensing the people in the house's apathy, I couldn't imagine a way the invitation could be made light of any more, except maybe for one way. I

had a crazy thought, one that would never come about. It was completely absurd. What if *everyone* invited to that wedding and reception did the same thing this family did and ignore it? What if no one came to the celebration? What if everyone made light of it by simply failing to show up? Could you imagine the disappointment, the frustration, and the outright anger of the families of the couple getting married?

And this is the really bizarre part of the vision I had in my head. What if those families desired to have a crowd at the wedding so much that they decided it really didn't matter who came? The families had gone to so much trouble. So much time and energy, talent and creativity had been expended on this event. A crowd needed to witness the vows being repeated and the rings exchanged. It takes a crowd to have a real party. The champagne didn't need to go to waste. The food didn't need to be thrown out. The band needed to have someone dancing to their music. The couple deserved to have the church and the banquet room full, so that they could feel the love of hundreds of people on their wedding day. If their friends were too busy to come and appreciate all the work that had gone into making this event a success, then the families of the couple would find people who would appreciate it.

My mind was in a whirl. And what if the families came up with this wild hare of a notion to come down to the shelter and the soup kitchen, where people like me can be found, and asked us to come to the party? Wouldn't that be something?

I could just see it. The families would send the wedding coordinator and the minister down to pick us up in Dart buses. They would say to us gathered there, "We want all of you to come to the

celebration. It doesn't matter who you are—young or old, male or female, sick or well. It doesn't matter what color your skin is or what clothes you are wearing. It doesn't matter where you were born, who your parents are, or what you have done. It doesn't matter whether you think you are good or bad.

Nothing matters except that you come and participate in the festivities. Come and enjoy it. Come and have a good time. Come and worship and share in the ceremony of the wedding service. Come and eat, drink, and dance at the reception. Bless the couple and wish them well as they begin their new life together. That's all we ask of you. Come and participate. Be a real part of the festivities. Put yourself into it as if you were related to the couple or among their best friends. Act as though this celebration were the most important thing in your life. That's what we want from you."

My fantasy continued as my eyes remained glued to that invitation. What I had wanted so much was coming true. My presence was being requested at this wonderful event. The wedding and reception were so beautiful, as meaningful and enjoyable as I had imagined. It was like heaven on earth. I could have stayed there the rest of my life.

To my surprise, in my imagination one of my friends, someone I thought I knew pretty well and who rode to the party on the same bus as I did, acted so strangely after we arrived. When we got to the celebration, he wouldn't participate. He simply refused. He sat with his hands folded across his chest and would not enter into the festivities. He paid no attention in the wedding ceremony. He did not eat or drink or dance at the reception. He tasted no cake, visited with no one, made no

new friends, did not join in the toast to the couple, and he did not give them his blessing.

He was there, but he was not really present. He made no effort, no contribution. He did not give of himself at all. Eventually he was asked to leave. I understood why, but it broke my heart. What a shame it was! He had the chance to be part of such a wonderful occasion, and he too took it for granted, as if this kind of offer came along every day. By his inaction, his unwillingness to participate, he too made light of the wedding banquet and insulted his hosts.

Yes, he made light of it, even more than did the family who had been invited at first. They made light of the invitation to the celebration by not bothering to show up. He made even more light of it by coming but refusing to participate in what it took to make the celebration worthwhile, something joyful and meaningful for the groom and his bride. He made light of it in still another way. As was true for me, he didn't deserve to be at that party. He was there by grace, the unbelievably extravagant generosity of the ones throwing the party. My friend didn't bring anything to the celebration; he didn't have anything to bring. Just himself. That's all he had to share, and he couldn't even do that. What a pity! That's making fun of grace. That's laughing in the face of generosity. That is making light of the celebration.

Of course, none of that really happened. It was all in my mind. As I said before, there is no way someone like me would be invited to a celebration like that. I don't even get invited to church on a Sunday morning for a regular service, much less on a Saturday night for a special occasion. As much as I would love for them to, opportunities like that

don't come along for people like me. Not in this life.

I resumed my morning ritual of digging through the trash cans along the alley behind those expensive homes. I had already spent way too much time pondering that printed invitation to a wedding banquet. The sun was well up now, and I had a lot more garbage to peruse before the people who lived in those houses came out and chased me away. But I couldn't help thinking over and over to myself. One thing is for sure. One thing I'm convinced of. If I ever received an invitation beginning with those words, "Your presence is requested . . .," I would jump at the chance to go and to participate. I would go with pleasure and enter into every aspect of it with enthusiasm. I would give of myself completely. I wouldn't hold back. I would do what anyone asked me to do, whatever was expected of me. It would be a privilege, an honor, a joy. And I would not make light of it. Would you?