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OUR SAVIOR'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
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“PARTY-TIME”

It reminds me of the time that Ruth and I threw a party—or tried to. It was our first Christmas in Ann Arbor, a little more than half a year after having bid our farewells to all you good folks here in Milwaukee. We decided we'd make it a 12th night party, you know the last day of the Christmas season on the eve of the Epiphany, January 5th. We'd thrown such parties with great success in our large old house on 32nd Street, just three blocks away from here —many of you had attended them in that grand old house I was always telling Ruth was nicest place we'd ever live in for hosting large parties.

We'd just recently moved from the cramped apartment in the student center to our little fixer-upper house just a 10 minute walk from campus—and Michigan Stadium— and we thought it would be great fun for the new acquaintances we'd just begun to make to see our new house. So we assembled our guest list, created a clever invitation that quoted the opening lines of Shakespeare's comedy "Twelfth Night" that reads:

*If music be the food of life,
play on, give me excess of it.*

A nice literary touch, don't you think, for our new "academic" community? We sent out the invitations for this last chance to celebrate Christmas and got busy readying our new house, purchasing our food and drink—good beer and wine and glogg and lots of Scandinavian seasonal delicacies—and then waited expectantly for our guests to arrive—the maybe 30-40 or so people we expected to at least stop by to share our

Christmas cheer and to sing with us the carols of Christmas for a last time.

Only “they” never came. Oh, two couples did finally show up separately, looking around sheepishly wondering if they’d arrived on the wrong night, but then they saw all the preparations and spent their time consoling Ruth and me, embarrassed for us with our table full of food and drink and all our obvious preparations for a large gala affair.

We were hurt—we were disappointed—and somewhere deeper down we were mad—even amid our perplexity and confusion about what in the world had gone wrong—a question we’ve never really satisfactorily answered, although Ruth likes to pin the wrap on my failure to include a request for an RSVP on the invitation, something we’d always resisted in our previous parties in Milwaukee. Was it the date? Was it our invitation? Was it the odd idea of a Twelfth Night Party that was

peculiarly off-putting? Was it some A2 quirk? Or was it us — we — Ruth and I? Lots of questions without satisfactory answers.

But we were hurt and we were mad and we were mightily disappointed. For, you see, in taking on the role of hosts we had made ourselves **vulnerable** and subject to the rejection, the indifference, even the misunderstanding of others — like the party-throwing king of today’s parable. As one NT scholar has written of today’s Gospel:

Vulnerability is built into every situation in which someone, with all his or her hopes and aspirations opens oneself for relationship with other people, who have their own attachments and projects.

(Yes, indeed, I came to think in time, these A2 folks are very much people “on their own trajectories,” into their own projects and careers and jealously protective of their own “time” in ways that seemed a bit different than what we’d experienced

here at Our Savior’s and especially our unusually closely-knit little community of friends—most of them Catholic--on and around 32nd Street where we used to do a lot of front porch sitting. We remember onetime hosting a backyard Memorial Day barbeque to which we invited many of our immediate neighbors in Ann Arbor who did in fact show up—you see, we don’t easily give up—but we remember how two women who had lived across the street from one another for many years—I think over twenty—had never met one another, until that day in our back yard!)

And so, this NT scholar goes on regarding this “vulnerability of the host,” *“any invitation offers the possibility of promise and fulfillment—or of disappointment and emptiness.”* Matthew’s version of Jesus’ story of the wedding banquet opens up all of this with great deftness, a story, by the way, that in St. Luke’s telling of it—Luke the “softer,

gentler” gospel writer as I often think of him—is more user-friendly and lacks the sharp edge of Matthew’s tale. I encourage you to read the stories side-by-side sometime where you’ll find one difference in detail being that in Matthew’s Gospel we have a king giving a wedding banquet where in Luke we have simply “a great dinner” given by an anonymous “man.”

Now from “The Godfather Part I” to “Four Weddings and a Funeral,” from “The Graduate” to “Father of the Bride” to “Runaway Bride” and the “Wedding Crashers” to Jesus’ own experience at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, and as many of you can attest from your own experience, weddings and the banquets and receptions that follow are often not only joyous but anxious, high-pressured affairs—just a little bit different than, say, a 12th Night Party. (Just yesterday I presided at my niece, Katie Miller’s, wedding at her folks place in Oconomowoc.) In other words, Matthew is

raising the stakes of Jesus' story by recasting it as a story about a wedding banquet thrown by a king for his son.

What's more, Matthew's telling of the story (and here let me add that scholars tend to think that Luke's version is probably much closer to Jesus' own original story than Matthew's) has much more of an "edge" to it—which leads us to think that Matthew may have had some very particular purpose within the context of the church of his day for retelling the story as he does with such a sense of urgency and even violent rage suddenly erupting so senselessly, so that first the invitation-bearing slaves of the king are mistreated and killed, to which the enraged king responds in kind by sending his troops out to destroy the murderers and burn their city. Not a morally uplifting story, to be sure. Scholars think this may reflect the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 being read back into Jesus' story by Matthew as God's revenge on the Jewish

religious leaders expelling of those earliest Jewish Christians from the synagogue— which sometimes erupted into violence. And similarly the casting out of the guest who showed up without an appropriate wedding robe— certainly an odd intrusion into the story— probably reflects Matthew’s repeated concern that the “higher righteousness” of Christ-like behavior clothe all who seek to respond to the invitation to come to the Lord’s table— a warning that simply showing up for the party isn’t the end of being a Christian.

In Luke’s version, for example, Jesus focuses on the lame excuses the invitees give for not coming while Matthew, more ominously says, “But they *made light* of it, a word in Greek that could also be translated as “they dissed” the king or, as we say, “they blew him off”— always a “maddening” experience as mere vulnerability and disappointment is deepened into outright anger bordering on

revenge, remembering St. Paul's words to the Romans we heard as our reading last summer as he wrote, "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.*"

"Vengeance" is a hard word we don't like to hear—especially in connection with God. But the word itself simply means God's meting out of justice—God's justice-doing—God's restoring justice—God's righting of a wronged situation—God's righting—God's justification--of our wronging behavior.

No, God does not like to be dissed—blown off by our casual "I've got better things to do." God wants us at the party, in our appropriate party clothes, having a "**good time**" in the literal sense of behaving as one of Jesus' special guests at table. That's where your mission statement, "**a place where God's diversity works**" says it so well. I for one—and I don't expect you

do either—think that God will finally take “No” for an answer. So the invitation is, the urgent invitation, we dare not blow off, for our own good: “Come to the king’s wedding feast for all is ready” — what the prophet Isaiah called “the “feast of rich food and well-aged wines strained clear” — for there is still room. More room, I expect, than we have excuses. And that’s good news—good news for a faithful and faithfilled community of the Inviting Christ that has been out inviting and serving your neighbors to the Gospel party while doing the hard work of hospitality by welcoming in the stranger into your midst for a century and a half.

Let me share just one memorable story from my time here with you in the 1980’s. I don’t know the exact date, but you know how we at Our Savior’s have long counted ourselves as a center of lively ecumenical and interfaith welcome—work that I especially enjoyed during my time among

you. Well, the day I'm remembering was a Sunday afternoon when Our Savior's played host to a gathering of folks from throughout the city that absolutely filled this place—more people than I'd ever seen assembled here. The comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory was the emcee this occasion sponsored, I expect, by the Milwaukee Interfaith Council or whatever it was called in those days, to honor the life and witness of Jim Groppi who was dying of cancer. I'll never forget squatting down to shake hands with the now weak and debilitated former lion of the civil rights movement here in Milwaukee as he sat in a wheelchair in the front of our sanctuary, now bald as a billiard ball due to his chemotherapy. Welcome to Our Savior's I told him, on behalf of us all. With those still piercing eyes he looked up at me and said, "Thanks for hosting this event, Pastor, you know twenty years ago I wouldn't have been welcome here." Ever the truth-teller and prophet, he told it like it

was—but in a kind and gentle way that marveled how despite how difficult things remained in our city on so many fronts in the 80’s—as I’m sure today—that some things had changed for the better and that we at Our Savior’s were both the beneficiaries and the benefactors of that change—the inviters and invitees to the wedding banquet of the King of Creation. Keep at it, my friends, for there is still room at God’s welcome table.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.