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Preparing for a wedding involves a lot of planning, and if you're curious how expensive the event might be, you can visit costofwedding.com to get an estimate. Type in your zip code, and the website will give you a range of costs. For example, in Elkhart, the average cost of a wedding is around \$20,000, ranging from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Part of the cost of a wedding depends on how many guests you invite, with each guest adding \$145 to \$177 to the cost. If you've got lots of friends and have around 300 people coming to the event, your cost could run as high as \$60,000 to \$100,000!

What if you planned for 300 guests and paid for the location, flowers, rings, invitations, wedding gown, tuxes, photographer, and food, and no one showed up? Seems a bit unfair, doesn't it? The photographer is ready to take photos of something. Someone should eat all that food before it spoils. You're ready to celebrate but no one has come to join you, so what do you do?

Jesus told a story about a similar situation where no one showed up for a wedding banquet

that a king had planned for his son, and so the host sent messengers into the streets to invite those who normally don't get invited to such fancy parties.

Just imagine if you received one of those invitations:

"Would you like to attend a wedding party, complete with lots of food and celebration?"

"Me? Well, I don't know. I'm not usually included in such events. Why would you ask me?"

"We have plenty of room left. Lots of food. Just be sure you dress up and look nice."

And so, you run home, put on your fanciest clothes, and arrive at the wedding feast ready for a celebration. You marvel at the decorations in such a grand space. The music is wonderful. The couple seem just right for one another. And the food—delicious! What a wonderful celebration.

But then you notice someone who showed up in disrespectful clothing, wearing a T-shirt with inappropriate language, which seems to mock the entire event. The host asks him to leave, indicating his apparel is not acceptable.

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That seems only fair, doesn't it? If no one comes to the party, invite others. And those who attend should show some respect. Once again, it's the basic things we learned in childhood. Play fair. Show respect.

This parable that Jesus told gives us another view of what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven, of what it's like to be in God's place.

First, it's a place where everyone is invited. God has invited us all to the heavenly banquet, regardless of our background, our skills, our shortcomings, our color, our sexual orientations, or our mistakes, or our successes. God's invitation has gone out to everyone. You can refuse the invitation, but God never gives up on sending out invitations.

Second, there's a dress code, so offer your best. It's not the style or appearance of your clothing that's the point, but it's about offering your best, what's appropriate. Regardless of what you can offer, give God the best part of yourself, not the hand-me-down leftovers that no one else wants.

And finally, as one author summarized in relation to the church,

the church is not a club with closed membership. Too often, we take our model of what a church is from the culture around us. We think of the church as we would [a gym membership]. We join, pay our dues, and in return we expect a fresh towel, clean bathrooms, a hair dryer and scented soaps to be at our disposal. Such inwardness, such a view of the church leads to a closed church, not at all the kingdom model Jesus talks about.

The kingdom model is outward, inclusive, welcoming, beckoning, inviting and open. It is also about service, not about being served.¹

If you received an invitation to such a place, how would you respond? With eagerness to join a place where everyone is welcome, even those you might not get along with? Or a bit of reluctance, maybe even refusal to participate? Before you answer that question, let's travel once again to our imaginary studio to bring Jesus' parable to life.

¹ *Homiletics*, "Be My Guest," October 13, 2002.

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Setting: Two chairs, one for host and one for guest, seated side by side facing congregation. Small table for host.

Doug: This is Pastor Doug with WPBA, “Parables Brought Alive,” coming to you once again to bring to life a teaching of Jesus. Last week we encountered workers who all received the same pay, regardless of how long they worked. Jesus told the parable as an illustration of the Kingdom of Heaven, as what it’s like to live in God’s place, where all receive the same reward. That may not seem fair, for Jesus seems to turn our idea of fairness upside down. Our guest this week was the center of another image of the Kingdom of Heaven, a story that begins with a party, is that right?

Guest: Yes. The king was hosting a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out lots of invitations, but no one showed up, so he sent out servants to follow up on the invitations.

Doug: I supposed he might have thought he had the wrong date listed on the invitation, or that he

forgot to include an address. I’ve received that kind of invitation in the mail—where an important detail is missing, and I wonder when or where the event is to occur.

Guest: I don’t think that’s what happened, for even when he sent out messengers to encourage his guests to attend and explained that the food was all prepared, no one came. They made light of the event and said they had other things to do.

Doug: That doesn’t seem fair. What a disappointment that must have been for the king. All that planning and no one to join the celebration.

Guest: In addition, those invited even killed the messengers who tried to invite them to the party! The king was so upset that he sent out soldiers to destroy everyone who committed such violence.

Doug: In terms of this party, no one seemed to be playing fair. I understand, however, that you attended the party. How did that come about?

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Guest: I don't often get invited to parties, for I'm usually left out of everything. I'm not real popular since I lived in the streets, and no one usually paid much attention to me. But the king sent out more messengers with the task of inviting people like me—those of us usually left out. I consider myself a good person, even though I don't fit in with the norms, and I couldn't believe some of the people in attendance at the party—some I would consider bad people. The king had even invited what I call the rabble rousers! That didn't seem fair to me.

Doug: I imagine that created quite an interesting party!

Guest: The king did have some expectations about proper behaviors, though, for when one guy began to show disrespect and rudeness, the king had him thrown out. The guest wasn't playing fair, you might say.

Doug: The Kingdom of Heaven—a place where everyone is welcome, even the outsiders and those we may not want to hang out with. When God welcomes us, however, God expects us to remember the basic thing we learned as a child: play fair, even with those different from yourself. I hope you'll join us next week when we go on location for another wedding event.

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