

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?
(Matthew 22:1-14)

Who'll ever forget the day Jesus came to our village, sleepy little Tabgha? He'd made his way through Galilee teaching in the synagogues and, if you believed the stories, doing some pretty amazing things. They said he could heal sick people. So when we heard he was coming to our village, I had to see for myself.

Turns out I wasn't the only one. Everyone wanted to see him. And not just our village. People came from all around – a huge crowd, all eager, all hoping for...something.

The synagogue in our little village couldn't hold them all. So Jesus led us out of town to a hill where everyone sat down. And then he started to speak.

"Blessed are you who are poor in spirit," he said, "the kingdom of heaven is yours.

"Blessed are you when you mourn; you'll be comforted.

"Blessed are you who are meek; you will inherit the earth."

He went on about people who hunger for God and work for peace and get persecuted. I didn't like the persecution part, but the way he said it made me think a little persecution might not be so bad if I got heaven in return.

It was quite a sermon Jesus preached there on that hillside. And when he finished we were all amazed. He was everything we'd hoped for and then some. And when he moved on, a lot of us went along. We wanted more.

It's been a while now. The stories we'd heard about Jesus were true. I've seen him heal people, saw him calm a storm on the lake by just saying one word, saw him feed 5000 people with just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. I even saw him bring a little girl back to life.

And I've heard him teach. He's not like the scribes and other "religious teachers" who want us to think they know it all, but you can tell they don't. Jesus just tells stories – stories about farmers and shepherds and good Samaritans and ne'er-do-well sons. And every time he says heaven's like that. And you get the feeling like he's been there himself.

His stories don't give easy answers. They're so simple, but they make us think, which isn't a bad thing.

But today he told one that's really got me baffled. For one thing, it's about a king, and what I know about kings isn't good. They're always raising taxes on poor people like me so they can build a new palace for themselves. Old king Herod was the worst, and he's dead, but still whenever someone says his name, we spit on his memory.

I don't know what to make of the king in Jesus' story. His son's getting married and he plans the biggest party anyone's ever seen, spares no expense. But why should he care? He just raised taxes to pay for it.

Anyway, the calf is roasted and the wine's on the table and the band is playing – only no one comes. No one. They've all got one excuse or another –

have to weed the garden, have to give the dog a bath, blah, blah, blah. Some of them even kill the servants the king sends to fetch them.

You can guess how the king took that! As some other king – or maybe it was a queen – said, “We are not amused!” So the king sends the army to take care of those thugs.

And then it gets even stranger, because while the soldiers are off killing the thugs, the king has all this food that’s going to waste. So he sends some servants out into the streets to round up everyone they can find – good, bad, rich, poor, it doesn’t matter – and bring them in to the party.

Only one poor guy – a street person – isn’t dressed right. The king sees him and goes ballistic. “How dare you come in here looking like that!” Well, what did he expect? This guy didn’t crash the party, didn’t ask to be there. The king’s servants dragged him in off the street. It’s not like he had a choice – or a chance to go home and change. So the king has him tied up and thrown out.

Then Jesus wraps it up: “Many get invited; only a few make it.” That doesn’t help. What does it mean?

Maybe I’m that little guy whose dream turns into a nightmare.

Do you ever feel that way? Like you don’t really belong, like you’re an impostor, like you shouldn’t be in the same room with all those nice people? And are you ever afraid someone is going to find out?

It’s like that nightmare where you have to stand up in front of a lot of people and they’re all laughing and you wonder why but then you look down and see you don’t have any clothes on.

I feel that way sometimes when I go to the synagogue. I sit there with all those people around me, all smiling, all content, all so confident. And feel like I somehow wandered in somewhere I don’t belong.

I remember once the rabbi started a sermon like this: “If your life is just fine, if your kids are loving and always do what they’re told, if you never get angry with your spouse, if you don’t have any addictive behavior, if you’re happy with your job, you can leave now. We’ll pause a moment while you do.”

Nobody got up! I was amazed. Why did everyone else just sit there? I thought I would be left all by myself. I thought I was the only one whose life wasn’t all that great. I thought the sermon was just meant for me.

I think maybe that’s what Jesus was saying – that church is for people like me. No matter how good we look, no matter how much we pretend we’ve got it all together, we don’t really deserve to be here. We may look okay, but down deep underneath our fancy religious clothes we know there’s the real us. – and the real us isn’t put together quite as well as we like people to think we are.

We may not deserve to be here, but by God’s grace, here we are.

I know Jesus said that poor guy got thrown out at the end. I wish he had stopped the story while everyone was happy. But he didn’t. So maybe it’s a cop out, but I just don’t pay much attention to that part. I like how the king invites the misfits, brings them all in to enjoy the banquet. What an invitation that is! They don’t deserve to be there, but the king invites them anyway. That’s good. I like to thing God’s like that.

All of our doubts, all of our feelings that we shouldn't be sitting there in the palace – that we wouldn't be sitting there if the king knew who we really were – all of that comes because we think we can only get in because of who we are or what we do.

But Jesus has always said it's about grace. That's what makes this story so odd. It's all about grace. We don't have to earn God's love. We can't earn God's love. Jesus shows us that in the kinds of people he hangs around with. Believe me, there are some pretty unsavory characters in the band that follows him. But he doesn't care. He invites us all. Everyone's welcome. Even me!

That's the main thing. We're here because Jesus wants us to be. We don't have to get our act together. We don't have to get our lives all cleaned up. We're invited to come just as we are.