

## BE OUR GUEST

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Matthew 22:1-14

A couple of years ago, my wife and daughter and I traveled to Italy to see the sights. While in Rome we spent a day at the Vatican. We toured the Sistine Chapel. We looked up at the ceiling. It was nice. It may not be the greatest work of art in the world, but it's certainly up there.

Next we walked over to Saint Peter's Basilica. I never comprehended just how massive that place is. I believe you could fit our entire church building inside the central room. Standing in Saint Peter's, one would assume that it must be the largest church in the world. But it's not. According to the folk at the Guinness Book of Records, the distinction of being the world's largest church belongs to a church that is a modern replica of Saint Peter's—just a tad bigger. That church is known as the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace. Do any of you know where this particular church is located? Western Africa. In the Ivory Coast. The Ivory Coast sits on the Atlantic Ocean bordered by Liberia and Ghana.

Construction of this church—the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace—was completed in 1990—just 30 years ago. It was built by the president of the Ivory Coast, a man named Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Houphouët was the first president of that country following its independence in 1960. He served until his death in 1993—33 years. He may be regarded as a good president or a benevolent dictator. He was a leader in African politics and some called him the 'Sage of Africa.' In 1983, Houphouët move the capital of the Ivory Coast from the bustling port city of Abidjan to his home village of Yamoussoukro. It is here that he built this church. The cost of the project is not known, but it is estimated to have run between 200 and 600 million dollars—an amount that has been criticized given the poverty of the country. The president claimed to have paid for it out of his own fortune, but no one knows for sure.

The church, nevertheless, is spectacular. It is graced with Italian marble and massive stained glass windows with glass imported from France. It features a 110-pound gold cross suspended from a chandelier made of Venetian glass. Just how large is this church? It has a square footage of 323,000 square feet. The dome of the basilica reaches 518 feet towards heaven—50 stories—80 feet higher than St. Peter's. The church has room for 18,000 worshipers, which is almost exactly what the Bridgestone Arena in Nashville can accommodate for a hockey game. When construction of the church was completed, Pope John Paul II, himself, was there for its consecration.

I first learned of Our Lady of Peace several years ago in an article which highlighted on just how empty it was. "If you build it they will come" didn't seem to

apply to Our Lady of Peace. Despite the capacity to seat 18,000 people, on a Sunday, there would only be a couple dozen worshippers. As one local admitted, “To be honest, we felt a bit sorry for the priest.” The priest, who has served the church since 1993 responded, “Let's just say we had a lot of time for prayers.”

More recently, just three years ago, I stumbled across another article, this one in the Wall Street Journal, about how things had changed at Our Lady of Peace. Civil conflicts which had plagued the region had ended, the economy rebounded, and slowly word was spreading of this gigantic jungle basilica. The trickle of tourists and pilgrims steadily increased. People were journeying from neighboring countries as well as India, China, France, and other places to visit this church. In 2017, an estimated 320,000 people came to the church. Attendance at worship had increased to the point where the priest was forced to use a PA system to conduct mass.<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded of Our Lady of Peace this week as I pondered our scripture reading for today—the parable of the wedding banquet. What if you built a church and no one visited? What if you threw a party and no one came?

In this parable, Jesus says, *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.* That is the situation for this parable—the king's son is getting married and the king is hosting the reception. Invitations to the wedding have been sent out and on the day of the wedding the king deploys his servants—his slaves—to inform those on the invitation list that it was time to attend. The party was about to commence. But for some reason, those people who had been invited chose not to come.

Hearing this, the king regrouped and he sends out another wave of servants who are instructed to urge the people to attend. The servants describe in detail the menu and the festivities and assure the people that everything is ready. Through his servants the king is practically begging people to attend the wedding. This time, the invitees just mock the king. Some go about their daily business, while others—and this is where the parable goes completely off the rails—others *seize the slaves, mistreat them, and kill them.* They literally shoot the messengers.

The king, understandably, is enraged. He responds by sending his troops out to kill those who killed his servants. And then, for good measure, he has the troops burn their city. This makes no sense because their city would also be his city. The king then informs his servants to scour the kingdom and invite to the wedding

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<sup>1</sup> [www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/07/worlds-largest-church-yamoussoukro-basilica-our-lady-of-peace/](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/07/worlds-largest-church-yamoussoukro-basilica-our-lady-of-peace/)  
[www.wsj.com/articles/a-miracle-at-the-worlds-largest-church-people-are-showing-up-1493306547](http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-miracle-at-the-worlds-largest-church-people-are-showing-up-1493306547)  
[www.thedailybeast.com/the-largest-church-in-the-world-has-the-fewest-worshippers](http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-largest-church-in-the-world-has-the-fewest-worshippers)

anyone they can find. The servants comply and they invite everyone—good and bad—until the wedding hall is full.

At the appropriate time, the king makes his entrance into the reception but he is dismayed to see that one of those guests—one of the those brought in off the street—is not properly attired. This guest is not wearing the traditional wedding robes that one would put on for such an occasion. The king approaches the man and asks, *Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?* And the man has no answer. The king then commands his servants to tie this man up and *throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Jesus concludes the parable by saying, *For many are called, but few are chosen.*

I cannot emphasize enough how bizarre this parable is. It is definitely not one we would teach at Vacation Bible School. The parable starts out well enough but quickly devolves into murder and violence leaving the listeners scratching our heads.

The common interpretation of this parable is that it describes how some who are called to the kingdom will reject God's invitation. And for all those who do accept God's invitation, there is still a minimum set of expectations. We see that in the man who is thrown out because he is not wearing the proper clothes. God invites us to the kingdom but we must be prepared.

We read the parable and we are curious why the people refused to attend the wedding in the first place. They should have been delighted to be invited. This was the social event of the season. Only the best would be there. If you are on the invite list you would skip your grandmother's funeral to attend. But I believe they turned down the invitation because they knew exactly what kind of man this king was—that he was petty, vindictive, violent, and egocentric. Given the choice, they did not wish to be around him. They did not trust that the wedding would be safe.

As I studied this parable, I realized that what we find here is the exact opposite of what we hope the kingdom of heaven is like. The world in this parable is a world of violence and death, ruled by a petulant king. It is the antithesis of what I hope God's kingdom is like.

The clue to the purpose of the parable is found in Jesus' introduction where he says, *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...* Jesus does not say "The kingdom of heaven is like a king hosting a wedding banquet," but "the kingdom can be compared to. Throughout the gospels, Jesus tells us what the kingdom is like. *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea.* But through this parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus challenges us to examine the world of the parable—a world that is not unlike our own—and ask, "Can this be compared to the kingdom of heaven?" The world of the parable is a place of violence

and mayhem. It is ruled by a capricious, easily offended monarch. Is the kingdom of heaven like this? No.

So what is the kingdom like? I believe that one excellent description of the kingdom can be found in the words of Psalm 23 which we read at the start of our worship today. Does this sound like the kingdom of heaven to you? *The Lord is like a shepherd who watches over me and cares for me. He offers me a safe pasture where I can rest. He shows me quiet pools of water to drink from. The Lord restores my soul and shows me the way to righteousness. And when I find myself in the presence of death I do not fear evil because God comforts me. Even with my enemies close by the Lord prepares a meal for me where I am safe. God chooses me and makes me his own. I am filled with blessing. Goodness and mercy shall chase after me always and I will call the kingdom my home forever.*

That is God's kingdom—a place of peace and sanctuary. At God's banquet there is no violence, no killing. The guests are safe and don't need to fear being evicted because they are not wearing the right clothes.

We all know the wonderful Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*. In this movie, a young woman named Belle is trapped in the cursed castle of the Beast. The servants of the castle are eager to make Belle feel welcome so they prepare a sumptuous meal for her. As they serve this meal they sing the song *Be Our Guest*. In the middle of the song, we can hear a line which beautifully reflects Psalm 23, "You're alone/And you're scared/But the banquet's all prepared." That's the welcome offered in the movie; it is the reassurance giving in the Psalm; it is the promise of God's kingdom. Even in the face of enemies, a sanctuary banquet has been set for us.

Do you remember that church in Africa? That gargantuan church that few attended? I believe that church can also help us as Christians better understand this odd parable of the wedding banquet. That church, when it was built, remained mostly empty, largely unused. The solution should have been to tear it down and start over or just abandon it. But that didn't happen, and things changed. People started attending. It's the same church, but it has moved from one end of the spectrum toward the other—from empty to full, from not serving its purpose to better serving its intended purpose. I believe the kingdom of heaven is like that church. It is not an either/or, but it is a location on a spectrum.

Jesus' parable presents us with a portrait of a kingdom that is grotesque, full of evil and violence. Our inclination would be to destroy that kingdom or at the very least walk away from it. But in reality, that kingdom is our world. If we destroy it, we will have no place to live. We will be like the man at the wedding who is thrown *into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

As Christians, I believe that our calling is not to abandon that world but instead to transform it, to change it from a kingdom of violence to a kingdom of peace, from death to life, from the randomness of an arbitrary monarch to the reassurance of God who commits to covenant. As Christians, our invitation is to mold God's realm of heaven here among us, a place where we say reassuringly to those who enter, "You're alone and you're scared but the banquet's all prepared. Be our guest."