

What would you do if you gave a party, and no one came? Jesus told a parable about a king who gave a party in honor of his son's marriage. But, no one came! What would you do? Some years ago, a newly wealthy couple moved into a beautiful mansion in an exclusive section of Newport, Rhode Island, where the leaders of society lived. They planned a gala housewarming party and issued invitations to all the names on the social register. But because they were newcomers, the invitations were ignored and no one came to the party. The wife was so humiliated, she closed up the house, said, "This house will rot before I open it again to anyone," and moved to New York City. The husband died a few years later, and for the final 25 years of her life, she lived as a recluse in a hotel, seen by no one except servants. The king in Jesus' story was also humiliated because no one came, but rather than withdrawing into himself, he told the servants to go and invite the street people!

This is a parable about a party. A party is the analogy Jesus most often used to describe the kingdom of God. A party is what heaven is like. A party is what the church is like! Does that image quite fit your impression of the church? Insofar as we have allowed the church's image to be anything other than a joyful, happy, celebrating fellowship, we have done the church an injustice. We have failed to live up to the expectations of Jesus for his people. In other words, relationship with God, in community with other people who are likewise in relationship with God, is like a party!

When Maria Theresa ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the court was the scene of luxury and wealth. At the wedding of her oldest son, Joseph II, 300 people were invited to the wedding, not to eat, but just to stand and watch the royal family eat. And that was considered a great honor! You and I are not invited just to stand and watch. We are participants, invited to God's party as full-fledged guests. It might have been an honor to watch Maria Theresa eat, but it is much more fun to be eating and partying than it is to watch. It is an honor to be invited to God's feast, and you are invited!

You are invited, because when God throws a party, when God invites folks into the church, everyone is invited. Who is welcome? Everyone. The king told the servants to go out and invite everyone. Go to the streets. Everyone is welcome, even the bad! In Jesus' story, those who eventually responded to the invitation were both good and bad (vs. 10). In the parable of the weeds, Matthew 13:36-43, the church is like my yard--a mixture of grass, flowers and weeds. In the parable, the task of differentiating weeds from plants, worthy from unworthy, is not up to the church, but will be accomplished by the Son of Man as judge at the close of the age. The parable in our lesson this morning concludes with the king throwing out a person who did not have a wedding garment. "Many are called, but few are chosen," Matthew concludes. But the King did the judging, not the guests.

Therefore, everyone is welcome in the church. You don't have to prove yourself, you don't have to dress a certain way, you don't have to pretend to be someone you're not! Everyone is welcome--weeds, warts and all! God will do the weeding, the judging! We do not have to define righteous or unrighteous, worthy or unworthy. We welcome people of all colors, all life styles, all sexual orientations. We welcome people wherever they are in their sorrows or their joys, in their failures or their successes. We do not lay

trips on people, expecting them somehow to live up to our expectations. Most people have enough trouble living up to their own expectations! The best way to help people is to invite them to a party, a worship service, a covenant group, where they can relax, feel at home, feel loved, wanted and needed. The church is where everyone is welcome, good or bad. God does the judging. We do the inviting and welcoming.

And "everyone" includes children! Children and youth are most welcome in church, including the worship service. Worship is barren without children and youth. We are not totally here without them. Two months ago our family returned to Minnesota to a family reunion in Scandia, a small town where the first Swedish immigrants came a century ago. Some of my wife Eleanor's ancestors are buried in the cemetery. The reunion began with all of us attending the Sunday worship service at the Lutheran Church. I expected to see a small, rural, declining church, but the St. Paul suburbs have invaded the area and many commuters now live there. The church was packed with over 400 people, 100 of which were children. Lutherans take their children to worship and it was beautiful. It was not a somber, quiet service; it hustled and bustled with energy.

Children and youth belong in worship. A worship service is barren without them. The party is an adult party without children, and many adult parties need alcohol before they begin to sizzle with energy. When children are present, like in family camp, energy is also present. We don't expect worship to be a somber, quiet, service of whispers. We want the children. A certain amount of disruption is expected and desired. Sometimes the unexpected happens. In Minnesota, churches are heavily influenced by Lutherans where Communion, even in Methodist churches, is served only to those who have been confirmed. Some 25 years ago I preached the universality of God's grace, where even children can receive Communion, rather than remain in the pews as if they were orphans. My people responded beautifully and began bringing their children to the kneeling rail for Communion. Communion services in those days were more like funeral services than joyful, celebrative feasts. People bowed in silence, there was no hymn singing, the electric organ played somber "funeral songs" with the tremolo on. During one such service, we were suddenly jolted when Bruce, age five, hollered across to his mother, "Hey, Mom, this is grape juice!" No doubt he expected blood! When God throws a party, everyone is invited, and accepted on his/her terms, wherever he/she happens to be on life's journey. We make no judgments. We accept people.

I wonder how God feels when he gives a party and no one comes! In an average church on an average Sunday only 1/3 of the members are present. Unlike the disappointed king and the humiliated woman who became a recluse, I wonder how God feels? When God gives a party, would you rather not go, or would you rather be totally there? Now, be honest. Some people are uncomfortable in groups. How do you go to parties? How do you come to worship; especially the first time, with people you don't know very well? With fear and trepidation? Palms wet? Do you stand on the sidelines and try to assess the feeling of the event, or are you the type who talks to everyone, shakes hands, makes conversation? According to Carol Pierce, who was a leader at the Multi-Staff Conference some of us attended in January, there are three levels of involvement: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group. Each of us feels most comfortable with one of these three levels.

The first level of involvement is the intrapersonal level. These persons have a strong sense of autonomy. They do not need the group for their own sense of well-being. They prefer and need time and space for themselves. They get their energy primarily from themselves. They prefer parties where they can choose to participate or not to participate. They do not like to be pressured, harassed or forced into "having fun." They prefer a worship service that gives them space and allows them to be reflective. They are quite content to walk in, participate in the service, and leave, without being greeted. They want it quiet during the Prelude so they can reflect and pray. They like the sermon when it challenges their intellect or causes them really to look at their lives. They like a formal service with lots of liturgy, so they can do their own personal worshipping.

The second level of involvement is the interpersonal level. These persons are rooted in connections with others. They want to be connected, and need to be connected with others. They are conscious of other persons and their needs, and they seek to make relationships with them. They get their energy primarily from relationships with other people. They prefer parties where they have the opportunity to get acquainted with other people. When they come to the worship service, they like to be greeted, but they want that greeting to be more than "Good morning." They want to get better acquainted with the greeters and begin to build a relationship. They enjoy making and meeting friends. They like to talk during the Prelude to catch up on what has been happening. They like the sermon when it has lots of stories about people. They like an informal service with singable and familiar hymns. They would like to see the choir. They prefer to have the choir visible, rather than stuck back in the corner, so they might "connect" with the choir and feel more a part of the service.

The third level of involvement is the group level. These persons identify themselves in relation to the group's identity. They find their meaning and enjoyment in the group. They enjoy being part of a group, and they will work diligently for the success of the group. When they go to parties, they like the middle of the floor, so they can talk to everyone, and not miss any of the action. They get their energy primarily from the group. When they come to worship, they don't worry about the Prelude, whether it's quiet or not, because they are still out on the patio, drinking coffee and talking. The best part of the worship service for these folks is the patio time before and after the service. In fact, for them the worship of God begins and ends in fellowship on the patio. They like music that unites the congregation, music that creates a sense of community, like a rock concert. They put up with the sermon, and like it better when it includes some jokes; but they really prefer a service where the pews are removed so they might sit around in circles and talk!

Which is your level of involvement? How would you like to plan a worship service with these three types of people in mind? Hopefully, the worship service and other church gatherings can become God's party for you. Hopefully, your experiences within our church are varied enough so you can fully participate, be totally there, at your level of involvement; at the same time being aware and tolerant of persons on the other two levels.

TOTALLY THERE  
MATTHEW 22:1-14

DOUGLAS NORRIS  
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PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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Will you make a covenant with God to attend regularly? Will you not only attend, but also welcome others and help them feel comfortable? A successful party requires participation and effort by a lot of people, not just the host/hostess. Likewise, a successful worship service depends on you. Sometimes we old-timers get so familiar with who we are and how we do things that it is difficult for an unchurched person to enter. Try to remember what it was like when you moved into a new neighborhood, or went to a party where you knew no one and everyone else seemed to be acquainted. Remember the first time you came to our church. Help new people find the nursery, follow the bulletin; at the same time being sensitive to the newcomer's level of involvement. If you are new and you feel uncomfortable, we apologize. We try to have new church members on the Evangelism Committee and Worship Committee, to keep us aware of the problems of entry. I'm glad you are here, and I hope that all of us will help lessen the anxiety of entry.

Will you covenant to attend regularly, totally here, according to your level of involvement? Will you covenant to help others feel welcome and free to participate at their level of involvement?