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Who's In, Who's Out

Matthew 22:1-14 & Exodus 32:1-14

During our lives we have all been members of different groups, teams, and organizations. Some of these are not that restrictive in their membership qualifications: AARP, Presbyterian Women, and student body or homeowner associations, to mention a few – if you are the right age, sex, go to a certain school, live in a certain neighborhood – you are in. Athletic teams, musical organizations and others require that you pass try outs or auditions, & that you have certain skill levels. Sororities and fraternities do not accept everyone into their membership. Still other groups require that you are a member of a specific profession, or that you are interested in the group's mission and purpose. Basic church membership means, at the least, that you profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Membership in specific denominations and/or churches may require adherence to additional belief statements and practices.

Some groups are rather loose in their membership requirements, while others require an ongoing and active commitment and participation. Some organizations you are able to join freely, while in others membership is by invitation.

Most of us have received them over the years – the invitation – to some sort of party or celebration or other kind of gathering. These are those events we look forward to, for they will be special and joyous times with family and/or friends. We are grateful for the invitation and that we will be able to attend. It is also likely that you have had to deal with the situation where you already have a commitment that conflicts with that of the invitation. Do you respond with regrets to the new invitation, or do you try to figure a way out of the previous commitment? And there also likely have been those times when you received an invitation to which you wanted to respond with regrets, but there was nothing else on the calendar, nothing to which you were already committed, and nothing to prevent your attending. So you started trying to come up with a believable excuse of some sort or you hoped that your daily schedule somehow worked out to be so hectic that you just wouldn't have the time and/or energy to attend.

In the passage from Exodus we are aware that God has invited this now freed group of Hebrew slaves from Egypt to be in relationship with God, to be the people of God. But this is such a new experience for them that they truly do not know what to do next, what is expected of them, and what, if any, are the requirements for this new relationship. And so, as was read, with Moses up on the mountaintop with God and not sure when he will come back, the people revert to old customs and have a gold idol of a calf made and then engage in a festival to the Lord, but with most inappropriate behavior. By their actions they were putting themselves outside of what it meant to be the people of God.

With God, then, threatening to destroy this "stiff-necked" people, Moses had to decide what to do. He implored and challenged God so that the people could remain in as the people of God. Moses urged God to turn from God's fierce wrath, which God did. Moses was willing to keep working on this

new relationship with God, to try to be faithful in figuring out what it meant for him to be the chosen leader of this people of God, and for the people to be God's people. Moses was living out his faith.

In the Matthew passage, Jesus tells this parable of the wedding banquet a king was having for his son. As the text says, the people had already been invited to the banquet. Now that everything is ready for the banquet to take place, the king sends out his slaves to let the invited guests know it is now time to come and share in this banquet. But these guests are uninterested. The slaves are sent again, but the guests go about taking care of other business or making excuses for not coming, then even mistreating and killing some of the king's slaves. So even while the king is waiting to host the wedding banquet for all has been prepared, the king sends an army, destroying the murderers and burning their city. The king then sends out his slaves again, telling them to invite everyone they encounter to this banquet, which they do. So both the good and the bad fill the banquet hall.

Many see in the mistreatment and killing of the king's slaves a description of how the Israelite people during the Old Testament period had dealt with the prophets God sent to them to try to turn them from their unfaithful ways back to God. Also referenced would be how the Jewish people maltreated Christian missionaries and apostles in those early years of the Christian movement. And for many, the killing of the murderers and burning of the city references the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Roman army led by Titus. This has been interpreted as God's punishment on the Jewish people of that time for their refusal to welcome and follow Jesus as the Messiah.

The 3rd group of slaves sent out is not restricted to going just to those who have previously been invited. The invitation is now to be extended to all – to sinners and Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. Anyone can respond to the invitation to come to the wedding banquet, to become a part of the people of God. And down through the centuries countless people have responded, as have we. All have said "Yes" when asked if Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior.

And so we are "in". But then what? Has and does membership in the church, being a member of the people of God, made and make a difference in our lives? That is the question we are led to as we ponder the fate of the one thrown out of the banquet for not wearing appropriate wedding garments, and so not honoring the king. Various commentators have written of this as follows:

The scene warns Matthew's community that its unfaithfulness as new tenants will bring condemnation. The final words serve as a warning against self-righteous arrogance among God's new people.

When they come in they must bring a life which seeks to fit the love which has been given to them. We are to come 'clothed' with the wedding garment of faith. We therefore need always to live in and by God's word of life.

Those who find themselves unexpectedly included may not presume on grace but are warned of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing except showing up. Matthew is making it clear that such pictures, in which unfaithful Israel is condemned, are not an encouragement to smugness on the part of his Christian readers. The whole section is instruction and warning to insiders, not a description of the fate of outsiders.

This serves Matthew as a vehicle for challenging his hearers about clothing one's life in righteousness. There is no privilege on the basis of status, not even the status of having

joined the Christian community. Only a life of transformed attitude and performance counts.

Yes, Matthew uses this as a warning to the members of the church. They have heard the gospel invitation and have been admitted to the company of the redeemed. But if they have not amended their ways and their doings, they will still be rejected.

Not only are we welcomed to God's fellowship, but we are called to obedience, to acts conforming to God's rule.

Called to obedience and then to act in conformance to God's rule:

Hank Greenberg was America's first Jewish baseball star & superstar. In a career that spanned from 1933 through 1946, Hall of Famer 'Hammering Hank' played for the Detroit Tigers and Pittsburgh Pirates. In 1934 the Tigers had their first chance to win the pennant in 30 years. An important 4-game series with the Boston Red Sox was to be played in September during the Jewish high holy days.

After receiving rabbinic 'dispensation' to play on Rosh Hashanah, Greenberg missed a crucial game on the even more holy day of Yom Kippur. Instead, he spent the day at a synagogue. Although the Tigers lost that day, Greenberg's decision won the respect of a nation. As syndicated poet, Edgar Guest, wrote:

Come Yom Kippur – holy fast day wide-world over to the Jew –
And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true
Spent the day among his people and he didn't come to play
Said Murphy to Mulrooney, 'We shall lose the game today!
'We shall miss him in the infield and shall miss him at the bat,
But he's true to his religion – and honor him for that.'

It was from the movie, "Chariots of Fire" that most of first learned of the Scotsman, Eric Liddell. A track star, a good rugby player and an excellent student, he was above all else a devout Christian who served as a missionary in China from 1925-1943. In telling part of his story, the movie reminds us that Eric chose to train for the 100 meter race at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. But when he learned that the heats were to be run on a Sunday, he switched to the 400 meter competition as he was not prepared to run on Sunday. Being a godly man he dedicated Sunday to the Lord and in extreme dedication to God he would not make any exceptions to the rule. So that Sunday of the 100 meter race he spoke in a Paris church.

Now the 400 meter race was not his strongest and he was not favored to win. But the day of the finals, he ran the race of his life, and won the gold in an Olympic record time, the 3rd time the record had been shattered in 24 hours.

As the son of Scottish missionaries to China, Eric saw his whole life as a race: a race for the kingdom of heaven. In his book, "Simple Truths", Stephan Bauman writes the following:

"I recently read that in 1905 Albert Schweitzer turned from his well-established and highly accomplished career in philosophy, music and theology, to medicine, so he could work in Africa on behalf of the Paris Missionary Society. Explaining this decision he

wrote, ‘For years I have been giving of myself in words’; he no longer wished to talk a good game, but to live authentically. ‘My life is my argument,’ is how he came to summarize his decision. Bauman continued, ‘This stark statement caught me up short, caused me to think for a moment about what the content of my life argued for.’”

That is what the texts for today are pushing each one of us to do. We have been made and designed to be in fellowship and relationship with God, to talk and walk with God. And “the fact that we enter God’s kingdom by grace does not mean that there are no standards. ... Jesus does not expect a half-hearted response on our part. Jesus calls us to accept the new life of the Kingdom of God and to live accordingly.” And so we each must ask: What, then, does the content of my life argue for?