

I mentioned last week that Lauren and I took a trip down the west coast a few years back. And I shared how one of my favorite memories from that trip was in San Francisco. But it was also during that trip, while in San Diego, that I had the best meal of my life. It was, to borrow the words from Isaiah's vision, "a feast of rich food" and "well-aged wines." Lauren and I still reminisce about that meal, even to this day. I wonder if you have had a similar experience. What is the best meal you've ever had? The meal where just the thought of it brings back all the smells and tastes, the meal that gets your tummy rumbling for just one more bite. When I hear Isaiah's words and the description of the wedding feast in our parable today, I imagine being back at that meal in San Diego. And then I realize that somehow, the feast that God is preparing will be incredibly and incomparably better.

So why then, does Jesus' parable sit so sourly in our gut? There is to be an immaculate feast and yet, this parable seemingly does nothing to give us the warm fuzzies or get our mouths watering for just a taste. Rather, it leaves us uncomfortable. It tastes bitter, just like how Matthew wanted it, I imagine. Because what Matthew knows is that the feast is only as good as our willingness to be full participants in it and what Matthew is concerned about is that we'll just be happy to be invited. Matthew is worried about how quickly a gift like grace can turn into complacency. That we will make certain presumptions about the grace we have received, resulting in lives that go on unchanged.

There are some passages that you can grow to love. And then there are parables like this which can and should always feel a bit unbalanced, to put it nicely. To put it more frankly, this parable is brutal, no matter how many times you hear it. So before we dig into its murky waters, let's all just take a moment and get the disgust out of our system. Woof, alright. Here's what we know. There is a wedding banquet that's ready to start. Everyone's favorite part of the wedding is about to begin – the feast, the music, the dancing – it's all about to happen. But for some reason, none of which are good, everyone on the guest list is flaking on their RSVP. It costs them nothing to prepare this day, it costs them nothing to attend, it costs them nothing to have been invited in the first place. Yet, they will not come.

But the wedding must go on, the party will happen, and this feast will not go to waste. So new invitations are sent out to everyone. The phonebook is opened and everyone gets an invitation – the good and the bad. And it is ensured the wedding banquet will have guests. The party will go on. And the best meal of your life is about to be served. But it is a wedding after all. It is a banquet held by a king, no less. Which means that it isn't just about a feast of rich food and

well-aged wines. It's an event that calls us to see that it's more than just about the food. The banquet, though free, comes with some expectations – we still are expected to honor the occasion. The invitation is free, and yet it is still an invitation to a wedding feast. Having had no invitation before, it might be a bit presumptuous to assume that now that we're invited, we can do whatever we want. We can dress how we want; we can act how we want. In other words, the question being posed to us is whether will we be full participants in the pomp and circumstance of this feast or will we be the party pooper?

I think Matthew's point is this: we are saved by grace through faith – this much is true. And this grace is free – unearned and undeserved. Nothing has changed about that. The invitation to join in the feast that God is preparing is yours and it is mine and it is for the sake of the whole world. That's the grace. And Matthew first wants to know if we will accept such a gracious invitation. But second, and equally as important, Matthew wants to see how will we be changed by this grace. Because the incredible thing about the grace of God is that it accepts us as we are – the good and the bad, the deserving and the underserving, the people at top and the people at the bottom of the social ladder – everyone. The grace of God in Christ Jesus meets us where we are and as we are. But this grace is far too determined to leave us as we are.

If we hold any assumption that this grace will not ask something of us, we have misunderstood Jesus' call to discipleship. The same grace that frees us from the weight of the law, now calls us to seek to do the will of God through it, without fear of condemnation. But the freedom we receive through grace is not freedom to remain unchanged. The invitation is only the beginning of the wedding banquet. The question and the challenge for all of us, is how we will choose to honor such a gracious invitation. Do we dare presume that the grace of Christ would not lead us to live more fully? Do we dare to believe that we would not be called to transformation?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you and I are called to the best banquet of our lives. May we be encouraged, that by the extension of such grace, we now seek to be more in our lives and in our faith, propelled and transformed by its freeing power, that we may seek to do God's will, without fear and trepidation. May we love more lovingly, share more generously, forgive more freely, rejoice more joyfully, live more fully alive, for God has given such grace freely. The party has started. The feast is ready. Come and enjoy this extravagant banquet. Let us receive such grace

and dress the part, for why should we settle for anything less than when such an abundant gift has been given? Amen.