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God's invitation

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

Did you receive an invitation to the recent wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton? Neither did I. But wouldn't it have been special if we had? Invitations to great events like weddings, birthdays and anniversaries are chances to socialize and celebrate together the blessings that fill our lives with joy.

In today's liturgy, Isaiah and the Matthean Jesus remind us that above and beyond the invitations we extend to one another are the invitations of God. In the first reading, the prophet describes a sumptuous banquet hosted by God for all peoples. Not only will there be food and drink in abundance but also healing for the sick and joy in God's reign. "Will you come?" asks God. "Well, of course!" we answer. "You don't have to ask me twice!"

But our enthusiasm is put to the test by the words of today's Gospel. In his parable, the Matthean Jesus acknowledges that some of those invited to the great banquet of God's reign have found excuses not to come. Family obligations, business affairs or lack of interest have taken priority, and as a result, they put God's invitation on hold or set it aside altogether.



It could be tempting to relegate the message of these sacred texts to the realm

of ancient history, and just as easy to criticize the protagonists for bad behavior. Yet the word of God, as

always, speaks to your life and mine here in the autumn of 2011. Clearly, the sacred authors are asking whether we are alert to the invitations that God sends into our lives each day. Carl Schenck warns that before we answer too quickly that nothing is more important than God and God's invitations, we ought to examine our gods (*Abingdon Preaching Manual*, Abingdon Press, 2004).

The 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich described a person's god as their "ultimate concern" (*Dynamics of Faith*, Harper and Row, 1957). Whatever is most important to us is our god. Family and business concerns, though they are good things, should not have been the ultimate concern for those in the parable. Leisure and relaxation are also good, but these cannot usurp the place of God. Healthy bank accounts and long-term investments are good as well, but these cannot be God. Such gods die when financial markets crash or when investments fail. What is our god?

Perhaps one way of answering this question is to consider how we respond to God's many invitations in our lives. Some of those are standing invitations that invite us to gather regularly for liturgy. These weekly or even daily invitations can become so routine that we might not be fully present at the banquet of word and bread and fellowship. At the end of a liturgical celebration, one pastor in a small rural parish in the South proclaimed to his congregation, "Go forth in peace; this has been the highlight of our day; it is all downhill from here." This colloquial way of affirming the eucharistic banquet as the source and summit of our lives remained with his parishioners, who struggled to value all else in their lives as secondary to -- and dependent upon -- that time of sacred sharing.

God's invitations reveal themselves in other ways as well. Through the persons who reach out to us in their need, God invites us to share. Through those who suffer injustice, God invites our advocacy and responsible participation at the ballot box. Through those who have no one to speak for them, no one to uphold their rights to live and work without fear, God invites our persistent involvement on their behalf.

In the beauties of nature, God invites our awe and admiration; in the calamities of nature, God invites our trust. In the warmth of friendship and familial harmony, God invites our gratitude; in the pain and turmoil of strained relationships, God invites our perseverance. In the vigor of our youth and good health, God invites our grateful service; in the pain of sickness and the struggles of old age, God invites our endurance and calm. In all our fears, in all our frustrations, in all our sadness, desires, accomplishments and joys, God is inviting us to be at peace and center upon the One who is to be our ultimate concern.

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