

An invitation: Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

There have always been those who reject the gifts they're offered.

by [Judith Johnson-Siebold](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

"Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. (Matt. 22:9-10)

"I cannot come to the banquet; don't trouble me now. I have bought me a wife; I have married a cow." The guffaws and catcalls of the preadolescent boys as they improvised on a familiar song were designed to attract the attention of the girls at the religious retreat. We girls pretended annoyance as they sang. We knew that we should be insulted, but were secretly amused by their twist on the words. The song that they thought they were improving with their hilarious lyrics is based on Jesus' parable of the marriage feast. In that parable, invitations to a special banquet go out to selected guests, but the invited ones make light of the loving gesture, and they make excuses for not attending. Stung by their rejection, the host invites strangers to partake of the banquet originally planned for the special guests.

Jesus' audience may or may not have understood his veiled reference to the people who rejected him, but through the benefit of hindsight we know to whom he was referring. He was the banquet, the Bread of Life, but not everyone wanted to attend. So Jesus flung the gates open to anyone who was spiritually hungry. Anyone could now come to the banquet. Before, Jesus had been offered as a gift to a small segment of humankind; now he had become a gift for all.

Unfortunately, throughout history there have always been those who reject the gifts they've been offered. In the United States, sexuality, a good gift from God, has been denigrated by the purveyors of pornography, a multibillion-dollar industry that distorts the self-giving of sexuality into the self-satisfaction of prurient appetites. Preying on the weak, its perpetrators pander to that which is basest and most evil in the human psyche. The admonition to "think only about whatsoever is pure and

good” falls on deaf ears—they’ve rejected the gift.

There have also always been those who make light of people with significant accomplishments. Whether from envy, the desire to deny power or the sin of neglect, the contributions of women and people of color have been devalued over the centuries. The apostle Paul praised the women who had worked with him, noting in Philippians 4 that they worked side by side with him. Unfortunately, later generations insisted that women were intended to remain in the private sphere. Until very recently history teachings have focused on the adventures of white males. It has taken many decades to come to the place where we recognize the efforts of females and minorities.

Our nations’ governments also make light of the gospel, sometimes using Christian rhetoric even as they deny its message by pandering to the rich and overlooking the needs of the poor. The Judeo-Christian ethic emphasizes the responsibility of the powerful to use their power to help those with no power. When we make light of that mandate and enjoy power for its own sake, or use it to reward those with influence, we are circumventing the channel God planned for helping the marginalized.

We Christians, wanting to fit into a secular culture, are often tempted to trivialize our commitment to God’s realm. Instead of being a light to the world, we sometimes make light of our responsibility toward the world in the name of God. We fail to bring to our daily round of activities the Christlike touch that would shine light in dark places. Even in our church activities we may behave more like nonbelievers than like Christians, worshiping in churches whose atmosphere is oppressive and repressive and neglecting to share Jesus’ concern for justice and freedom.

A few years ago I attended a concert featuring a folk-singing group whose songs celebrated inclusiveness and freedom. They sang about going to jail for justice, and tears sprang to my eyes—I was overjoyed to hear their pleas for justice. They harmonized a tune about not picking on people, and their words suggested a welcome for gays and lesbians. My heartbeat quickened with joy. Here were the Christian values of justice and inclusiveness being named and shared by hundreds of people. I felt that there was more of Christ here in this secular arena than in my congregation, and that I had been hiding my feelings about the need for sexuality justice so that I could better fit into a congregation where exclusiveness, not inclusiveness, was the norm.

When we are Christian in name only, or when we adopt a stance we call Christian that overlooks justice and hospitality toward others, we are depriving the world of Christ's influence through us. We are also depriving ourselves of the rigor that could change our lives. A culture of cynicism and emphasis on form rather than substance encourages light gestures rather than strong commitment. Jesus did not make light of people and their concerns, but poured out his life, both ultimately and on a daily basis, as he listened, healed, taught and loved people, both friends and strangers.

The people originally invited to the marriage feast declined the invitation. It was not a high priority for them, so others were invited to take their places. Christians are invited to take very seriously the invitation to divine intimacy and community with others. In doing so, we become light that shines in the darkness. We are to be like the rising sun, highlighting what had previously been obscured by darkness with the light of God's grace and justice.