

A pastor told his congregation: "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. In preparation for next week sermon, I ask you to read Mark Gospel Chapter 17.

The following Sunday comes along and the Pastor said, "Before I deliver my sermon, please raise your hands if you read Mark Gospel Chapter 17." Almost every hand was raised. The Pastor smiled and replied, Mark Gospel only has 16 chapters, now I'm going to proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying.

Jesus again in reply spoke to the chief priests and elders of the people in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come. A second time he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those invited: "Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast.'" Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.' The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests."

The year before my Mom died, we had a 90th birthday party for her. We rented a large hall and had an open house from 12:00 to 5:00 with lots of music, food and drink. Invitations went to all her family and friends, as well as everyone at the Senior Citizen Center. The week before the party, the Pastor made an announcement at all the weekend Masses that all were invited and welcomed to Betty Fisher's 90th birthday celebration. So many people that showed up, we ran out of food by 2:00. Some of my brothers went to a local restaurant for more food and sure enough all that food was eaten. What a glorious day it was to see the banquet hall filled.

In our story, the banquet hall is filled because whomever they found they invited to the feast. This image of inviting whomever they came across, is what Jesus did throughout His public ministry.

However, the religious leaders could not understand why Jesus was invited certain people to follow Him. The Pharisees and the Scribes complained to the Lord's disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with Tax Collectors and sinners".

Jesus explains that He reached out to the least, the lonely and the lost because that was His purpose to preach the Good News to the Poor, to heal the broken hearted. When Jesus invited Zacchaeus, a rich, greedy Tax Collector, to come to Him, the crowds complained and grumbled, wondering why would He invite someone like that to follow Him. The Lord replied, "That's why I have come, to save those who are lost."

When we receive an invitation to a birthday or anniversary or a wedding, it's nice to know that the people who sent them want us to be there, to me it's their way of saying, "Come along and be with us." I remember running into a couple I knew, Pat and Joe in the grocery store. They told me that they were on their way to their 50th wedding anniversary party. Before saying "Good Bye" they asked, "Marty why don't you come along and celebrate with us." Just the way Pat and Joe invited me, I knew they wanted me to be there with them and sure enough I went along.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus meets people along the way and invites them to come along with Him. To His Apostles, He said, "Come and see." To His disciples He said, "Come and follow me." To the sick, He said, "Come to me all you who are weary." To the young, He said, "Let the children come to me." My favorite verse: Jesus said, "No one who comes to me will I ever reject." What a powerful message: "no one who comes to me will I ever reject."

Before entering the Seminary, I worked for the NYS tax department, on the state campus in Albany. I moved Guilderland, to be closer to work. I began attending daily Mass at Christ the King church, where the Priest, Father Michael Malone walked down to my pew, introduced himself and welcomed me to the parish. Before long, he asked if I would like to be a member of the Youth group and soon after that he invited me to be a Lector and Communion Minister. Fr. Malone's gracious acts connected me to the parish, which also led me to the Seminary. The longer I knew Fr. Malone, I realized that his gift of hospitality made everyone feel welcomed, that they belonged.

One of Fr. Malone's favorite songs is "All are Welcome." Some of the lyrics are:

Let us build a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live, a place where Saints and Children tell, how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace, here the love of Christ shall end divisions, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

As Jesus was going along, He welcomed people to come along with Him. Each of us are so blessed to have said Yes Lord we decided to come along you and to follow you. We now are called to invite and welcome others to come along with us to follow Jesus.

Most of us know people who feel like outsiders, as if they don't belong. This week take some time to write, texted or call a person who may be struggling with feeling of being left out, it could be a family member, friend or neighbor. Sometimes a phone call or message can help people feel less isolated and alone.

Let us pray: Please pray after me: "Lord Jesus, your love and mercy is open to all who come to you. Thank you, Lord, for your gracious invitation to follow you. I invite you more deeply into my heart. Amen and Amen."