



“DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION”
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Matthew 22:1-14

I learned a song when I was a child, a church song. I wanted to share it with you. Bear with me if I make a mistake or two. I did in the early service and got in trouble for it. “I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet. Don’t bother me now. I have married a wife. I have bought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Don’t bother me now. I cannot come.” The part I messed up in the early service is I bought me a wife and married a cow. Anyway, which we as children used to sing a lot, that’s why I mess it up when I try to sing it as an adult because that’s the way we learned it as kids.

It’s an interesting song. It says I cannot come. I have fields and commitments. I have other obligations. I have other priorities that have taken my time and my attention away from my attendance at this banquet. I tell you that story because that song really comes from another Gospel version of this same story. It speaks of those who have other obligations, those who have things on their plate that they must attend to. They can’t come to the banquet. But this isn’t talking about other obligations. This parable that Jesus tells in Matthew’s Gospel talks about folks who not cannot come, but folks who would not come. They had no other obligations. They chose not to come. It was a question of will.

It’s interesting the setting for this story. It follows in the latter half of Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew is already very concerned about what’s going on in the early Christian Church. By the time that he sat down to write his Gospel or the writer of Matthew sat down to write this Gospel, truths had been told for so long that the stories that Jesus told were almost second nature. Everybody knew them and they knew them intimately. But Matthew was dealing with a situation in his church that was a little bit different than what we read in the Gospel from Matthew, that the setting in which Jesus found himself. But Matthew drew a parallel.

Jesus had been taunted and had been challenged from the get-go from those who were in power in the church that is to say in the synagogue, in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees all of those folks who were trying to maintain the status quo to keep things low key so that Rome would not get upset. Well obviously that didn’t work. For by the time that Matthew wrote his Gospel some twenty years after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD things had pretty well gotten out of hand. And they were the ones, that is to say, the early Christian Church were the ones who were receiving a lot of that blame for the destruction of Jerusalem and most specifically the burning of the temple.

There would be no more sacrifices in Judaism from that point forward. Matthew has been known as being a very anti Jewish Gospel just from the way he characterizes the Jews in the Scriptures. But there is something you need to know about that. It is not that Matthew hates Jews. Matthew himself was a Jew. Most of the early Christian Church in Matthew’s congregation were Jews. The concern that Matthew had about Judaism wasn’t Judaism itself. It was more about the issues of faith and faithfulness. The people to whom he was speaking, they weren’t interested in faith or faithfulness. They were interested in the law.

So Jesus preaching to these folks, he speaks to them about a kingdom parable. Keep that in mind. Keep that in mind in the beginning of this. He told them once again in parables saying “the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to”... Anytime he says that, he is talking really about life in the Kingdom of Heaven, not necessarily the parable setting itself. Jesus is talking about what it is

like to be a part of God's Kingdom even here on earth and what that looks like. His analogy is very simple. It's a wedding feast, a wedding banquet. It was interesting, I just did a wedding last night. I married a young couple. It was a beautiful occasion. Everything was wonderful and I, like every other pastor that I know of, as soon as we retire we've all committed ourselves to writing a book on our most memorable weddings - all of the things that we have ever experienced as pastors doing weddings. All of the interesting things that have happened to the flowers that came that were the wrong flowers or cummerbunds that came undone as they are walking down the isle or let's see, there is also the infamous mother of the bride and photographers. We all have stories. We can preach it, can't we? We all know it. We've done it and it is one thing when you've done a wedding just once for a child or maybe twice, but when you've done a hundred or a hundred and fifty or so, it gets old real fast. We all want to write our stories.

So when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a wedding feast, most preachers go "oh, no. This is not going to be good." But when the average reader, when everyone reads this parable, this is disturbing. This parable hurts. This parable is not the same Jesus that we know of. This parable speaks about a judgment that comes down that makes us uncomfortable because quite frankly we're not used to this kind of judgment. We're not used to this kind of statement from Jesus where Jesus actually throws someone out of a wedding banquet for not being properly attired. Casting judgments like that, that doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. That's not the Jesus we love. That's not the one that fills our hearts with warmth and fuzzy feelings.

But nonetheless this is a parable not about Jesus, but about the Kingdom and about the expectations there are for those who have been invited. He tells the story and he says the wedding banquet was there and as he tells this we can take it apart real fast and look at all the characters in this. Obviously the King who he mentions here is God. That's pretty self-evident. The son is Jesus. We assume that the wedding is between Jesus and the bride and we assume that the bride is the Church. Matthew would have us believe nothing else. The church is Jesus' bride. It's a wonderful festive occasion. Anyone who is a believer in Christ is invited to come and be a part of this celebration, this festival, this banquet, this feast.

So the invitations went out. Now all the preparations are done. The tables are prepared. The animal has been slaughtered. The meat is ready. They are having a barbecue. The wine is there. Everything is perfect. They have the fine linen cloths. They have the greatest the best china. They have all the sterling silver. They have the crystal goblets out. Everyone is invited to come and celebrate at this feast. So the king sends the slaves out. Go bring the folks in. We're ready, we're finally ready. And they snubbed the slaves not once, but twice. They would not come. It's not that they couldn't, they wouldn't.

Now tell me something. When Jan was up here just a few moments ago she was talking about an invitation. When you get one, what is the natural, the normal response that we always have? Oh, can't wait. These folks got an invitation and didn't want to come. The invitation was enough. Did you hear that? The invitation was enough and when they were told the second time to come to the wedding banquet they beat up the slaves who had invited them. The king was enraged. He destroyed the city. He destroyed the murderers, burned the city and then he said, "My wedding is ready, my son's wedding is ready. This feast is prepared and we're going to fill this hall. Go and get all the people you can find and bring them in so that this hall is filled."

Now I told the early service, I said you know we were talking about this on Wednesday at our brown bag Bible study. I said I've half a mind to not get up and preach this morning unless this hall was filled and, I thought, you know that's what the king would have done. The wedding feast is here. It's a wonderful celebration. It's appropriate that we should have a full house here and then I thought that was awfully arrogant of me so I decided not to do that. But there's a point in which the wedding

hall is here and the feast is prepared and people have chosen not to come. Do you sense that? Those who were invited, the king says, were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone. And they did and brought in good and bad and the hall was filled.

Matthew tells several of these parables of Jesus. He teaches this over and over again that somehow those who were originally invited, those Hebrews if you will, those chief priests and Pharisees, the scribes, the Sadducees, all of those folks who were a part of the original covenant with God. They were invited and they chose not to come and that's disturbing. It's disturbing to us because we think, has God gone back on the Covenant. And the answer here is "no." Just because you got an invitation doesn't mean that you are necessarily going to come into the wedding, does it? Just because you have the invitation and the reason you got the invitation was because of your birthright. My dear friends that's not true anymore. Just because your parents were a part of a church somewhere or even here, just because you were raised in this church here doesn't necessarily mean that your invitation means you get in. You're invited to come, but you actually have to show up. And we are not talking about church attendance here. That's too easy. We're talking about showing up in the Kingdom and that is having that mindset, that frame of mind, that frame of heart that says that I want to be a part of the Kingdom. I want to live that life of the Kingdom. It means being willing. There's that question of will again. It means being willing to be transformed.

Well the king walks into the banquet hall and there is this fellow there and obviously he's not dressed appropriately. And you know churches really like that passage because it means that you are supposed to wear your Sunday-go-to-church clothes and those what aren't dressed appropriately ought to be taken out. No, Jesus is not talking about that kind of dressing. There is a statement when you are dressed for a wedding or when you are invited to a wedding you do want to wear your very best, because what that shows is that you have reverence and honor for your host, the king, royalty. You bring your very best. You wear your very best. And what Jesus is talking about in this parable is not the outer garment, but the outward and visible signs of that inward transformation. That this person who came to this wedding feast improperly attired was someone who never changed inside. Let me put it in a different way. They used to say something to the effect of "you can't have your cake and eat it too." Well folks that's one of those sayings that got messed up over the years because the original statement was "you can't eat your cake and still have it." You can't have it both ways.

People who came to this wedding feast improperly attired were folks who wanted to still maintain the life style that they had before they knew Christ and yet still come into the Kingdom. It doesn't work that way. There's an accountability that must take place here and that concept of having your cake and eating it too is what Jesus is getting at.

Tony Compollo tells a story, and I've probably told it in here once or twice before, but I think it bears repeating, about himself. He had been called to go to Hawaii. He flew into Hawaii and he was supposed to get up and speak before a large conference the next day, but of course jet-lag had set in and there he sat twiddling his thumbs at 3:00 a.m. Hawaii time, wide awake. Deciding that he couldn't stare at the walls any longer, he decided to go down and find the nearest coffee shop. He found a little restaurant, a little diner, one of those little greasy spoons in a hole in the wall on hotel street downtown Honolulu. He was the only one in there besides the guy behind the counter whom I'm not sure you ever really want – he would probably not pass the behind the kitchen door thing. It was not that kind of a great place. Three o'clock in the morning he is eating his piece of pie, drinking his coffee and about that time several prostitutes walked in. One of them's name was Agnes and they got to talking and you know prostitutes at 3:00 a.m. in the morning, they – well I don't know if you know them or not – I don't know that, I'm only telling his version of the story but he said they are not quiet people at 3:00 a.m. They are very loud and boisterous. They talk off and on and they shout and holler and laugh. He said when you are the only one in the coffee shop and they

are sitting on either side of you at the counter it's very difficult to not pay attention to what they are talking about. It was at that point that he noticed that Agnes spoke up and said, "You know what, tomorrow is my birthday" and one of the other prostitutes said, "well, gee whiz, Agnes, what do you want from us a birthday party or something?" She said, "No, I don't want anything from you, I was just telling you tomorrow is my birthday." After awhile they got up and left and again it was just Tony Compollo and the person behind the counter, this scraggly old character, this old salt. And he said, "What would happen if we threw her a birthday party, let's do that. Can we throw her a party?" And the guy behind the counter said, "You know that's really nice. I think we can do that. Agnes is one of those girls that nobody does enough nice things for her. I think that would be great." And so they planned it all out. The guy behind the counter says I'll bake a birthday cake and Tony Compollo gets together with some of the other folks there and the two of them they hit it off and they make up all the decorations and the whole bit. Sure enough the next night they are ready and about three o'clock in the morning here they come in. Surprise!!! And everybody was all excited because Agnes was having a birthday party and they brought out the cake and they said, "Go on, Agnes, make a wish and blow out the candles." She's real quiet for a little bit and she blows out the candles and then they hand her a knife and they said, "Go ahead, Agnes, cut the cake, cut the cake Agnes." And she is silent holding the knife there and she says, "You know nobody has ever done this for me, ever. Do you mind, would it be alright if I just kept this cake just for a little while." Sure Agnes. If that's what you want to do, you keep the cake. It's yours. She says, "Gee, thanks!" and she takes the cake and very carefully carries it over to the door and leaves. The whole restaurant is quiet. And finally the guy, this old grouchy man behind the counter, he looks at this Tony Compollo and he says, "Just who are you?" And he says, "I'm a preacher. I'm here on a conference." And he said, "Nah, you're not a preacher. I don't know any preacher that would do that for someone like Agnes. What kind of church do you belong to because if you're really a preacher I would belong to that church." And Tony Compollo says, "I don't know what it was, but I had the presence of mind to say I belong to a church that believes in throwing birthday parties for prostitutes at three o'clock in the morning."

There is a part of us that wants to keep our life the way it is. We don't want to be transformed. We want to keep our cake and go back to our same life. But God is calling us through Christ in this parable to experience the Kingdom completely, wholly and that means being transformed from the inside out. It's not enough to just get the invitation and think that that's all you need. More is required. You need to show up. The invitation is wonderful, but unless you come to the banquet you haven't lived. And when you do come to the banquet, know that you can't keep your life the way it was. There is an expectation of transformation. To know who it is that has invited you means to respect and honor that to change your life to come to the banquet. It means that we need to be dressed for the occasion spiritually, spiritually so I pray that we will all consider that in how we've all been invited because many are invited, many are called, but few are chosen. Being a part of the chosen means a willingness, a willingness to respond to the invitation. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!