

DRESS FOR THE JOB YOU WANT
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
10 OCTOBER 2021
MATTHEW 22:1-13

Our first text this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 1-13. Listen once more for the Word of God:

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

To what, dear congregation, shall we compare the Kingdom of God? Oh, you remember the parochial images: The kingdom of God is a pearl of great price, a seed of mustard grown into a bush, it is a hidden treasure in a field.

The kingdom of God is like a banquet.

The kingdom of God is like a feast.

The kingdom of God a party and you are invited to that party, you and everybody you’ve ever known.

The kingdom of God is like a wedding where everything is ready

- but first the kingdom of God is like a series of no-shows who'd already RSVP'd "yes" — but decided at the last minute to skip the feast *and* kill the unfortunate mailman whose task it was to deliver the message that all was ready.
- The kingdom of God is a village burned as a result of their failure to show.
- The kingdom of God is some poor schmuck who, having finally come to the feast, is cast into the outer darkness because he wore the wrong thing, and everyone knows that wearing white to someone else's wedding is a crime punishable by damnation.

The kingdom of God is a place where, despite all that, the meal is warm and ready, and you have an invitation.

This too is the kingdom of God — buckle your seatbelts and put in your mouth-guard, because the gnashing of teeth is what really gets you. Welcome, members and visitors, to Westminster Presbyterian —

Friends, even that was the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

How many of you, I wonder, have heard a sermon on this parable? My dad, a lifelong Presbyterian who has the Sunday School pins to prove it, told me he'd never heard it before — he'd not heard it preached, he'd not heard it taught — it was as if the text simply did not exist.

And you can understand why.

We don't usually talk about parables like this, especially the ones in the New Testament. Just the mention of weeping, much less outer darkness, seems too gauche for our tastes, too stark for Jesus.

But here we have it. Now it's important to remember when we read Jesus' parables, that they are not a report from the seven o'clock news. Jesus is telling a story meant to provoke a reaction. His language is thick with hyperbole, full of stark contrasts and unexpected twists. Jesus is telling a story to get a gaggle of religious people to understand something new about the kingdom of God.

And he's telling that story in the shadow of the cross. Matthew is recounting Jesus' final days and his final teaching. Readers know, and certainly Jesus does too, that the religious authorities are looking for any excuse to take him into custody. Jesus tells his parable of the wedding banquet knowing that he is facing death, attempting to make sense of the absurd rejection of the Good Kingdom he's spent his career preaching.

Rather than coming out and accusing the religious elite of hypocrisy and infidelity to God, Jesus gives us a story in allegory, the type of story where just about everything stands for something else. The King is God and you know who the Son is. The wedding banquet, as it so often is in Scripture, serves as an image of the Kingdom. The servants are prophets — sent and killed and sent again, leading all the way up to John the Baptist. Given the time of Matthew's writing, most scholars assume the burning city is Jerusalem after the destruction of the temple.

And the man in the flip flops and a t-shirt at the reception....? Well, we'll get to that.

You can make sense of everything in this story: the time of writing and the trouble Matthew's community had in understanding why the Gospel had not yet taken hold, the context of Jesus' teaching, and its layers of meaning. Still, the parable should come as a shock.

This is the word of the Lord, but the speech is rather garbled. What kind of King is this? What kind of kingdom?

And, the perennial question of every party-goer,
am I dressed right?

It's a question I've asked myself many times since coming to Westminster because some of y'all are fancy. And not "fancy" like when the Olive Garden opened on Harbison Blvd. and we all put our Sunday best on for endless breadsticks, fancy, dare I say, like Applebees. Y'all are legitimately fancy. When I was hired, I realized quickly that I was going to need formal looks for the sundry weddings, fundraisers, and events I was going to attend. My pastoral work necessitated shopping, and before long, I'd built up a closet with three seasonally appropriate formal gowns.

And thanks to my grandmother, Alice Stuckey, I had a fur stole too. The crown jewel of the Stuckey collection.

Which is a good thing because early on in my tenure here I found myself invited to a wedding on the Ocean Course at Kiawah. But this wasn't *just* the wedding, it was a multi-day event. There were formal and semi-formal events on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, all leading up to the most beautiful wedding I've ever seen — 200 folks under gorgeous chandeliers overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

In the days leading up to that wedding I fretted over my wardrobe. I must have looked like I was packing for a European cruise, I brought so many suitcases. But I pulled it off, especially Saturday, when I busted out the fur stole, embroidered with my grandmother's name — which is, as an added touch, the name we share.

The event was stunning. The guest list was impressive. There was more food than I've ever seen, champagne freely flowing, bug spray on silver trays. Have you ever been to a feast that just floored you?

This was that feast.

But what Matthew tells us is that the Ocean Course, though it cost a small fortune, has nothing on his King's wedding banquet. When the time has come, the King reviews the list of "yesees" — and urgently instructs his servants to gather the guests, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and **everything is ready**; come to the wedding banquet."

"Everything is ready" is the perfect tense. The extravagant dinner, the fattened calves, they are already on the table. It is time. Only the guests remain —
but their dinner is getting cold...

The first set of invitations — the ones previously accepted — are turned down. The guests once willing to come now decline. Put the violence aside and consider the way this king might be humiliated by their rejection. The feast, the rejoicing, the celebration spurned for no reason.

Consider also how odd the king's next choice is. He risks further humiliation by sending his servants out again. This time, though, he sends them to fetch whomever they can find. This King will stop at nothing to make sure the banquet hall is full.

Remember, in this parable every one thing stands for something else. Matthew tells us in no uncertain terms — *God is summoning the world to the banquet, it doesn't matter*

if you RSVP'd, if you are a head of state, or on the top line of the Times. You are invited.

You are summoned to eat the finest foods and drink the best wines simply because you were passing by, because you were seen and God wants the table to be full! Your moral standing, whether you are “good” or “bad” is irrelevant in the face of the summons, your worthiness in the eyes of the kingdom, your bank accounts, your land, your capital, all of it is irrelevant.

It is senseless. It is radical hospitably—a surprising openness—a stunning reversal. A bunch of nobodies find their way to the king’s feast — come on down, you might rub elbows with someone who doesn’t have a home or drinks too much, or stole from the corner shop, or maybe you’re at table with some good ole boys and the etiquette teacher from down the road.

It is absurd, isn’t it? You are invited. And him, and her, them and they. All are invited.

That, dear congregation, is the best news, that is the Kingdom of God. You didn’t earn it or buy it. You are invited because you are, because the king is generous and wishes that you come.

It is a lovely image. The kingdom of God is like a king who summons a bunch of flotsam and jetsam to take their place at the table. He calls them to assume a position in the kingdom, a kingdom whose doors are wide open — open to the social outcasts, the poor, the neglected, open to soccer moms and workaholics and folks just looking for a place to go. Open to widows and families of 12. Open to such as these, to such as we, to those who otherwise would never had an opportunity to partake. The invitation to the feast is a picture of pure, undeserved grace.

How lovely, though admittedly odd, is this kingdom of God
And how lovely it would be if the story ended there.

Set the hyperbolic violence aside. Matthew’s Jesus intends to shock you, to get your attention. This parable is a sketch of salvation history, a story of the cycle of rejection that the Good News faced among the chosen, the church, and the world.

Still we have to contend with my greatest fear on any number of Saturdays — arriving under-dressed to a wedding.

Now two things can be true at once. The doors to the hall are thrown wide open, but there's a dress code. The invitation is gracious. But there are expectations for the guests.

“Friend” is not what you want to be called in Matthew’s gospel, and it’s the first word the king utters to a certain poorly dressed guest who happened loitering by the punch bowl in a pool cover up, clutching his red solo cup to his chest. “Friend,” he says, “what in the world is this costume?”

Here’s where I want you to remember again, that this parable is an allegory. Most everything stands for something else. The king is God, the Son our Lord, the wedding feast is the Kingdom which is among us even now, though not yet fulfilled.

What, then, is the garment? Does a man deserve damnation for wearing cargo shorts and flip flops to a wedding? Well, perhaps. But no, of course not — the “garment” that the King expects is not hewn from cotton and linen. The garment which the kings expect is the willingness to change.

Clothing, as it so often is in our stories, is a metaphor. Clothing is life visibly transformed by the call of God and the invitation to discipleship.

The “Wedding Garment” is not tails or floor-length gowns. The garment in the kingdom is worn on our hearts, our minds, our wills, our work.

Perhaps we expect that because the call goes wide nothing is required of the guests. But the story of discipleship from Peter’s first call is a story of lives radically transformed — “follow me” — not because you are wealthy or great or beautiful or poor or dull or brilliant, but because you are. Stop what you are doing, embrace this strange new thing. Follow. Change course and be changed.

Every other guest called off the street found time to change. But this one fellow, whether because he thought he was special, or because he thought the king would forgive his petulance, declined to do so.

That matters.

The invitation — which is a gift of grace, radical, underserved grace — is offered. But it comes with expectations. Rightly accepted the call changes us. Rightly accepted the

invitation to the feast — the invitation to discipleship — makes a discernible difference in our lives. Christian life does not look like any ole thing, it looks like a great big feast, and it asks only that we don the wedding garment.

In our parable today the sublime meets the terrifying, and it compels us to question our fidelity: are we rightly dressed? God's call is open and free. It is without stipulation. It is addressed to individual subjects as subjects, respecting their decision to come to the feast or to decline.

Yet the call, the election, remains to something, toward something. It is a call to a feast, an expensive feast, and to treat it as any other meal on any other day is to misunderstand the God who calls, *that* God's desire for lives rightly oriented toward the Kingdom, *that* God's sacrifice in sending the Son, and *that* God's radical remaking of all things toward life everlasting. It's to misunderstand the joy of the feast.

This is a story, not a headline. It's a parable, meant to provoke and challenge. It's not history. It contains deep truth but it's not fact. The man who came in his cargo shorts was cast out, but one thing we know of the God of Israel is that his judgments are in service of his love, and those judgments are not eternal.

Perhaps in the outer darkness he had time to find a wedding garment, because the banquet hall was still accepting merrymakers (it still is!). And perhaps we, after these long days of isolation, ought to ask ourselves on this side of the final banquet if our closet is up to snuff.

There's good news: you are invited. In fact, the party wouldn't be the same if you decided not to show. But it's not just any party. You have to come ready.

God will meet us wherever we are but will never leave us where we were found. In meeting God we need to prepare to dress for discipleship, for the job we purport each week to seek. To clothe ourselves in mercy, in love, in care for the neighbor, in awe and gratitude. To sacrifice the things of this world for the Kingdom among us, a pearl of great price, a mustard seed, a hidden treasure, a gift that should change us forever. *Amen.*