

# “A Welcoming God”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – March 24, 2019*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 21:23-32

Matthew 22:1-14

A wedding guest without a worthy wardrobe results in being cast out of the party and into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? What is this: some cruel, ancient version of *What Not to Wear*? Clearly, there is more to this story than proper attire; more at stake than what or what not to wear when invited to a royal wedding.

In our walk through Matthew’s gospel, we have been studying the stories of and about Jesus, including the way he often taught through parables. In between last week’s reading – the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in chapter 20 – and today’s texts, Jesus has entered into Jerusalem, overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple, and cursed the fig tree for not bearing fruit. Thus, the time and setting for today’s reading is new: it is Holy Week – then if not yet now – and Jesus knows that his remaining days are precious few.

In our first reading, we heard the story of the two sons; one who said he would not work in the vineyard but then did; and the other who said he would and then did not – offering a contrast between the outsiders who accept Jesus and the insiders who reject him. A second parable, which we skipped over today, is about the wicked tenants who, after killing the absent landowner’s son, are punished as the vineyard is given to others. Those who reject the Messiah – Jesus says – will be judged according to their actions.

But the third parable that Jesus offers is equal parts confusing and disturbing. The king invites people to his son’s wedding banquet; when those on the guest list refuse the summons, the king destroys them, burning their villages. Then he sends his servants out into the streets and invites everyone to come. Do you really believe anyone would refuse after they saw what he did to the ones that turned him down?

“Good and bad,” the people come; they fill up his banquet hall. Yet, the king spots a person who is not wearing the proper clothing for a wedding feast and kicks him out. Jesus ends the parable with the words: “many are called, but few are chosen.” What is that supposed to mean?

This is the traditional interpretation: the king represents God which means this banquet is God's eternal, overflowing feast. The original invitees are the religious authorities, to whom Jesus is now speaking, and their Jewish ancestors. The servants are God's prophets who have been mistreated for their unpopular message. Thus, the commoners – the people of the streets – are all of us, both “good and bad;” not unlike the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus chose to spend much of his time on earth. But, someone – we're not told who – is missing a wedding robe and cast out; we'll come back to him later.<sup>1</sup>

Given its placement during Holy Week, we presume the Pharisees are the target audience for this parable. As the Jewish people had been promised a Messiah, God had provided one; and yet, for the most part, they were not interested in Jesus. So, Jesus opened the doors and let anyone come in. As Tom Long puts it, “God wants everyone at the party, but not everybody wants to come or knows how to behave when they get there.”<sup>2</sup>

A version of this same parable is also told in Luke, but with some significant omissions. Many biblical scholars believe that the original parable would not have included verses 6 and 7 and that, by adding them, Matthew, or his source, makes the story highly improbable: would people really kill one another and the king have a city destroyed over some rejected party invitations – and all of this take place before the food gets cold?

The final five verses in Matthew's parable also have no parallel in Luke's version. The king comes in to see his guests, but it appears he is not there to mingle with them, but to inspect them. One poor soul lacks a wedding garment. To the outer darkness with him – weeping and gnashing of teeth!

Where Mark and John never use this particular phrase, and Luke does so only one time, Matthew says it on six occasions, including four times during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem. It appears to be his own pet phrase; maybe written as a message to his own community, decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, warning them to remain faithful in light of God's still coming judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Many are invited, but few are chosen. Even that statement is a mystery, isn't it? What is the difference between being invited and chosen: especially to attend a wedding banquet? By the end of the story, we realize that all people have indeed been invited to come to the feast, whether at the beginning or later on; but not all

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Rawn, “Feasts and Invitations”

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, *Matthew* from Westminster Bible Companion Series

<sup>3</sup> Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

allow themselves to be chosen. Some refuse, some ignore, some even attack; and some don't pass the dress code inspection.

If we consider ourselves among the invited, how can we know that we are chosen? Is that the question that we are being asked to consider? Or, maybe, a more appropriate one is this: are we instead the ones who should be out gathering the "good and bad" from the streets into the banquet? The king sends his servants out to gather indiscriminately. It's the king's job to decide who stays and who goes. Could it be that we are not gathering because we ourselves have decided who we want in the banquet, and who we do not?<sup>4</sup>

So, maybe Jesus tells this parable to show the religious leaders in Jerusalem that they are behaving too much like this king. They have created seemingly arbitrary boundaries about what is or what is not acceptable; and are more fixated on who is in and who is out than about taking part in the wedding celebration. What if Jesus is saying, "This is that way you have been doing it; let me show you a different way it could be done?"<sup>5</sup>

So, about that poor man who was cast out for not having the proper clothes; having started the day uninvited, how could he be expected to be dressed for the wedding? The sad thing is: he ends up worse off than he would have been had he never been invited. Sure, he might have missed out on the banquet, but he would not have been bound to agony. What if next our guest minister for next Sunday were to show up for worship without a proper clerical robe; would he be bound, gagged, and stuffed into the coat closet as punishment?

Since this is a parable, there are almost always deeper layers to explore. What else, then, could the wedding garment mean? Is it faithful obedience to the wedding host? Maybe this could explain why those first invited guests respond with excuses or indifference: they didn't want to put on the garment; they lacked respect for the king and instead were caught up in trivial things. Throughout the New Testament, we hear about clothing ourselves with the kinds of things God requires of us: of putting on a Christian life of compassion, humility, patience and the like. Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus has offered a consistent theme: that God's gracious invitation needs to be met by our faithful response.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, each of us are given different gifts that, working together, build up the body of Christ. Some are apostles; others teachers. Some are care-givers; others labor behind the scenes. And yet, we are each called to be present in this gospel

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<sup>4</sup> John Dobbs, "The Wedding Banquet"

<sup>5</sup> Steve Thomason, "Did Jesus Have a Problem with Authority?"

<sup>6</sup> Alyce McKenzie, *Matthew* from Interpretation Bible Studies

work; active in our response to having been called; having been gathered in and welcomed home. The wedding feast is open to attend, but it is not – at least not until God’s kingdom has come – our final home.

And so, maybe you have chosen to make a donation to Church World Service for Blanket Sunday; or to support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, who is on ground, working with disaster victims in the Upper Midwest and abroad. Maybe instead you check in with a neighbor who lives alone, or got up early the last few Sundays to help at a pancake breakfast, or have volunteered with clean-up efforts in a local park. Maybe you show your care through letters or phone calls, offering rides, or bringing donations for the food bank. These are the kinds of clothing that followers of Jesus are called to put on; these are our faithful responses.

Indeed, many are called but few are chosen. The chosen are the ones who realize that just showing up at the banquet is not enough. Instead, they insist that week after week, day after day, they are called to be that salt of the earth and the light of the world. The chosen are the ones who see themselves not only as God’s invited guests, but also called into the world; who believe that Jesus, the Messiah, is revealed in the ways we are connected with each other in pursuit of the common good of the earth, this neighborhood and this body of members. No matter what we think about whether someone is “good or bad;” no matter their opinion about the same, we are called to take the invitation to the streets: that God loves you; God is searching for you; and God welcomes you.

So, what not to wear? Certainly complacency, or any kind of garment that would show we are content simply with the way things are. What we ought to wear – so that the world can see who we are and who has sent us – is the kind of compassion, humility and patience that affirms we should not, and cannot, just let things remain the way they are.<sup>7</sup>

Parables, we have said, have many different layers; so, before closing today, try this one on for size. What if that one person at the banquet discovered to be without a proper garment is Jesus who – after seeing some other guest without a wedding robe, someone like you or me – traded his proper clothing for our tattered rags? In the end, our greatest motivation for putting on the clothing of the Christian life – and working to welcome others into the banquet – is our gratitude for having been welcomed ourselves by God: not because we deserve it, but simply because it is God’s gracious gift. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Karoline Lewis, “What Not to Wear”