

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Appropriate Dress Required

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 9, 2011

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Matthew 22:1-14

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. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again 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.' ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then 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.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

Can you remember where you were and what you were wearing on April 29th of this year? Let me give you a hint: it was a Friday. Here's another hint: it was the day of the wedding. Which wedding? Kate and William's, of course. You probably didn't remember because, like me, you weren't invited.

The popular press and most of us refer to it as “Kate and William’s wedding,” but the invitations that went out to the 1,900 guests who were invited had the correct wording: “The Lord Chamberlain is commanded by the Queen to invite _____ to the Marriage of His Royal Highness Prince William of Wales, K.G. with Miss Catherine Middleton.” The invitation prescribed appropriate dress: “Uniform, Morning Coat, or Lounge Suit.” This was a royal wedding. Whatever I was wearing that day, I know it was not appropriate dress.

Jesus makes a royal wedding and appropriate dress for it the center of his parable in this morning’s gospel. A king’s son is getting married, and he has prepared a lavish and sumptuous banquet to celebrate. Whom do royal families invite to royal weddings? Other royal families. Royalty don’t generally socialize with common folk. But it seems that the king in Jesus’ parable has some pretty boorish friends, royal or not. He sends out his slaves to call the people he’s already invited to come to his wonderful banquet but they simply **“would not come.”** They won’t even give a reason.

So the king tries again. He sends the slaves out with a description of the wonderful food that’s been prepared, but the invited guests **“make light of it.”** They don’t have time for partying, even with royalty. They’re too absorbed in their work on their farm or in their business. And incredibly, some of the invited guests turn on the king’s messengers and mistreat and murder them.

Imagine how you would feel if you **had** received an invitation to the royal wedding. I’d think, “This isn’t right. There must be some mistake!” But what if it were true? Wouldn’t you consider yourself incredibly honored? Yet here we have people who snub a royal invitation, who prefer their humdrum daily affairs to a fabulous party with a king and his family, and who actually abuse and kill the people who invite them to that party. It’s breathtaking.

The king is **“enraged”**. He sends his troops and destroys these murderers. But he’s determined that his son will have his banquet, so he sends out more slaves into the highways and byways to recruit anyone and everyone they can to come. And they come, **“both good and bad.”** The banquet is on.

But as the king walks from table to table making his guests welcome, he finds a man who is not dressed appropriately. The king asks him, **“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”** Jesus tells us, **“And he was speechless. ¹³ Then 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.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”**

Appropriate dress is required for a royal wedding. It's not just a get-together with friends or a backyard barbecue. You can be sure that the guests on April 29th spent a lot of time and money painstakingly putting together what they wore to the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, now the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

Jesus says this royal wedding banquet shows us what the kingdom of heaven is like. The king in the parable is God. He rules the kingdom of heaven. His slaves are the prophets who have been calling his subjects—God's people—to his Son Jesus' wonderful wedding banquet. In ancient times, royal weddings celebrated the joining of one royal family to another. Marriage unions between families were often negotiated to bring peace between two warring kingdoms. God's wedding banquet for his Son celebrates the union of the human race with God. In Jesus, God becomes fully human. Jesus is also the Lamb of God, who died a human death to take away the sins of the world. At the Lamb's wedding feast Jesus is married to his bride, the church. It is the definitive peace between a righteous, kind, loving, and holy ruler and his rebellious people. It brings peace among themselves.

The kingdom of heaven is the supreme good for every human being. Jesus' point is that even though God's kingdom is supremely desirable, many of God's people have the nerve to make light of God's continual invitations to it—and worse.

The various people invited by the king in the parable dishonor him in different ways. We might think that not being dressed appropriately was a much less serious insult than murdering the king's slaves, but we'd be wrong. Everybody who was invited knew the high honor of their invitation. There was no excuse for wearing inappropriate dress. You can be sure that if an inappropriately dressed guest had showed up at the British royal wedding they would have been turned away. Dishonoring the king is dishonoring the king, no matter whether it's done in a big or small way. Being thrown outside the kingdom is eternal separation from the only truth and rightness and goodness and joy there is because it is separation from God, the source of all those things.

Jesus uses three words in this parable to describe the people who honor the king's invitation. They are "worthy", unlike those who made light of the invitation. They are "good", but they come along with the bad. And they are "chosen" from among the many who are called. Every person who was invited showed their character in the way they responded to the invitation. Their responses run all the way from murderous hostility to wearing inappropriate clothes to rejoicing in being honored by the king and enjoying his hospitality at the banquet.

Jesus told this parable to the Jewish elders and priests in Jerusalem during the last week of his life on earth. They enacted the parable within days when they dishonored the Lord, the King of Israel by conspiring with the Roman authorities to have God's Son put to death. The people who are "worthy" or "good" or "chosen" are the people who honor the king and his invitation to his Son's wedding banquet. Unlike the first people invited, they value the high honor of being invited. Unlike the second group, they listen to the message of invitation and respond to it. And unlike the man without a wedding robe, they come to the banquet appropriately dressed.

Being "worthy" or "good" doesn't mean God lets us into the kingdom of heaven because we've done good things. Being "chosen" doesn't mean that some folks are arbitrarily picked out for the kingdom of heaven before the beginning of time and no one else can hope to get in. That makes a sham of the invitation.

We need to understand that no one that God invites is worthy to be included in the glorious wedding banquet of his Son Jesus Christ in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus alone is worthy, and he confers his worthiness on those who understand their own unworthiness and trust in him. The people in the parable who understood and valued the king's invitation behaved accordingly. When the king's slaves called they listened because they came from the king. When they went to the banquet they wore appropriate dress because it was the king's son's wedding banquet. What made them worthy was the worthiness of the One who had invited them. They changed their schedules and their lives and their clothing in keeping with the high honor to which they had been invited. Their worthiness came from the worthiness of their king. Their worthiness consisted in their honoring him.

Today you and I stand at the end of a long line of persons whom God has been inviting to his Son's wedding banquet since the beginning of time. Make no mistake: it is a banquet for the ages, the ultimate celebration of the joining of heaven and earth. It will be the end of humankind's long and bitter struggle and the beginning of an eternity full of joy.

We live today in a world and a culture that is in open rebellion against our kind and loving and generous king. Even though he has been inviting human beings into his kingdom for thousands of years, many have dishonored him and ridiculed his invitation. It's sad, because he is inviting us to enjoy his joy, to love with his love, to be perfect with his perfection. God became a human being, Jesus Christ, for just that purpose.

If you had been on the streets of London on April 29th and seen a couple of guests on their way to the royal wedding, you would have realized they

were dressed to participate in something special. You may not have known what it was, but they would have stood out. How do we dress for the king's banquet in the kingdom of heaven? First, we change our clothes. We take time out of our lives to seek out the appropriate attire. We find out what the king desires and we do it. What the king desires is guests to fill his wedding hall. He has created all those people around us who are cut off from his love and his generosity. We honor the king when we make it our goal to live in relationship with them so they can see that we behave and speak in ways that show we are on our way to the banquet.

We change our behavior and our attitudes towards our Christianity. For many of us, church is where we come to see our friends and enjoy time together. That is as is should be. But we must remember that outside our church are millions of people nearby and far away who don't know who Jesus is, or that he has invited them to his banquet. We must remember first of all to honor God by honoring his Son and the sacrifice of his life that he made for those who don't know him. That means introducing people to Christ who don't know him.

We honor God our king by bringing him and his invitation to the world. That is Christ's mission. It hasn't changed. There are many opportunities to do that here at St. Matthew's. Join Dave Vachet at Church Hill Activities and Tutoring. Visit the sick and people you know who can't come to church. Teach children about Jesus in Sunday School. Travel to China to teach English or come on one of our mission trips.

God's wedding banquet is waiting. It is like no other event or blessing we have ever known because it is perpetual rejoicing in the company of the source of all joy, God himself. In the 19th chapter of Revelation John describes the wedding banquet of God our king for his Son Jesus Christ. Untold multitudes joyously celebrate the joining of heaven and earth, and all are wearing the appropriate dress worn by those who have honored him by testifying to him in the world:

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; ⁸ to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure’-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. ⁹ And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are true words of God.’” (Revelation 19:6-9)

Let us dress ourselves appropriately for that banquet every day. Let us seek to honor our great God and his Son by spreading his gospel, his invitation to all the world to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

Let us pray: