

Farmville Baptist Church
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Matthew 22:1-14
This Wedding Makes Bridezilla Look Tame
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For much of the church year, we join churches around the world in following what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary. The revised common lectionary is a three-year plan of Scripture reading for use in worship and private devotional reading. Each Sunday, the lectionary provides four Scripture passages: an Old Testament lesson – we followed those texts in our recent series on the Exodus, a Psalm lesson – which we hear each week, a New Testament lesson, and usually a lesson from one of the New Testament letters. Each year, one of the Synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke is featured, with the gospel of John showing up some in every year. There are many advantages to following the lectionary for preaching and worship. One of the most important is that it keeps preachers honest. Following the lectionary keeps us from defaulting to our favorite passages; it requires us to wrestle with texts that we might not touch with a ten foot pole otherwise. This will certainly be true over the next few weeks as we turn to the gospel of Matthew and engage some of the most challenging parables Jesus ever told. The setting for today's parable is a wedding, and as today's sermon title notes, this wedding feast makes Bridezilla look tame.

What do we do with a king who can't get people to come to his own son's wedding, and then retaliates in horrific fashion? Today, paparazzi stalk royal weddings – to get pictures of the bride and groom of course, but also to see which celebrities made the guest list. If you score an invitation, you clear your calendar to get there. Although those invited to the royal wedding in Matthew aren't all celebs, the principle is the same: you don't turn down an invitation from the king. In the Ancient Near East: you would receive an invitation in advance, then the servants

would come around to remind you, or round up all the guests when it was time. In today's text, none of the guests would come. Not one. So, the king tries again – sending out a different group of servants to the A list. These servants try to entice the invited guests with what is on the menu, but it is all to no avail. This time, the guests make light of the invitation, then they kidnap, torture, and kill the messengers. In retaliation, the king – on his son's wedding day – becomes so enraged that he calls out his troops to destroy the murderers and burn their city – which is actually the king's city – right? Reality TV has nothing on this story.

After this ugly scene, the king sends a third group of messengers – to invite a new group of attendees. The food has been paid for and prepared – the wedding will go on – but they need guests. “Go into the main streets and invite everyone you see,” the king says. So they go and gather all they can find – good and bad – and they fill the wedding hall. It seems like all is well that ends well, except there is one more bizarre twist. 22:11-14 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 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.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

(PAUSE)

What kind of king slaughters the first set of wedding guests who refuse to come, invites a second set of guests – literally off the streets – then banishes one for not being properly attired? First, where would someone who is invited off the street right before the wedding get a wedding robe? Were they handed out to all the guests as they arrived and he just missed one? (PAUSE) And what is Jesus saying about God and the kingdom of heaven when he starts the whole story with “The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his

son.”? I have to tell you, it makes me wish we had stayed in the book of Exodus instead of going back to the gospel of Matthew.

To sort out this troubling parable, we need to start with who wrote this passage and why, and then get clear about the type of passage we are dealing with. Let's start with the author of Matthew and why he was writing. We all have a world view, or lenses through which we see the world. For example, I am a middle-aged, upper middle class, Caucasian American woman, and I view the world from that framework. I can't change that. I can be aware of how I see the world, and work to see the world from other's viewpoints, but I can't totally shed my filters or lenses. This is true for Biblical writers as well. Some people believe that God dictated Scripture word for word to the Biblical writers, but many others scholars disagree. Although these scholars believe that God certainly worked through the writers, these men viewed the world through the lenses of patriarchy and it affected how and what they wrote. In addition, each of the gospel writers had an agenda – a particular audience they were writing to and a particular point they wanted to make about Jesus that influenced what stories they told and how they told them.

Matthew was written for Jews and Jewish Christians to convince readers that Jesus is the royal Messiah. Scholars think it was probably written between 70 -80 CE – after the fall of Jerusalem, we'll see in a moment why that's important. The parable that we heard this morning is the third of three judgment parables that Jesus directed to the chief priests and the elders. So he is talking to the establishment – the insiders – the religious leaders of his day.

This parable is known as an allegory - – a story where characters point to, or stand in for something else. In light of all of this background and context, let's take another look at this bizarre story. The whole parable is about Israel's salvation history from the time of the OT prophets up through the sending of Christian missionaries in Matthew's day.

The king represents God, and then, of course, the son is Jesus. The first group of invited guests is the nation of Israel – and the wedding banquet stands for their salvation – it is the messianic banquet. The guests, Israel, refuse invitations delivered by the first 2 groups of messengers who represent the Hebrew prophets. The last group of messengers represent early Christian missionaries.

So – in this allegorical scenario – God invites Israel – the chosen guests – into salvation history. They originally accept, but then turn away. God sends two waves of Old Testament prophets as a reminder: the first group is ignored and the second group is disregarded, tortured and killed. This brings us to verse 7 where the angry king (God) destroys the city. As we mentioned earlier, it's a really troublesome verse isn't it? This is a wrathful view of God. A number of scholars believe that the destruction of the city and its inhabitants refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD – and that Matthew, through his worldview, is interpreting this event as God's judgment on a rebellious Israel who had rejected the Messiah.

By the time we get to verse 8, the banquet hall is still empty. So God sends out a third group – Christian missionaries this time – with the message that the banquet is now open to all – not just the original guest list of Israel – but to everyone – both good and bad, Jew and Gentile. The kingdom of God is like this – the expected guests are absent, and the most unlikely ones are present. If the story ended here, and we interpret it as an allegory through Matthew's worldview and mission, it makes sense.

But wait, as they say on late night TV, there's more. We're back to the bizarre twist where the king circulates through the banquet hall and confronts a guest who is not properly attired. The man is speechless – and the king has him bound and banishes him to the outer

darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The parable ends with the saying “Many are called but few are chosen.”

In early Christianity, the new believers were often pictured as donning a new set of clothes –the full armor of God is an example, it was symbolic of giving up the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity. It appears that this guest responded to the invitation to salvation – he made an appearance, but he did not follow through by “changing his clothes” and adopting the new life of faith. Remember that Matthew is talking to the religious leaders who are challenging Jesus’ authority as the Messiah. He’s saying to them, “You’ve showed up at the banquet, but you don’t really believe.” So, in Matthew’s version of the story, these false believers or imposters will be dealt with harshly in the final judgment. Since Matthew’s readers were also Jews, this parable serves as a wider warning to **insiders**, not a description of the fate of outsiders.

So what might this intense parable originally addressed first to the Pharisees and then to Matthew’s Jewish readers mean for us here this morning? Originally, as non- Jews, we would be part of that third wave of guests, the outsiders who were fully welcomed. But after over 2000 years, let’s be honest, as church members we are certainly the insiders, and there is a word of warning for the church here and now. How often have we, as the church universal, not been open to the new ways that the Spirit is speaking and leading us? Church members in Europe are now a small minority – and the great cathedrals there are being converted into stores, restaurants, and museums. Here in the US, church attendance and membership are declining steadily – we looked at those numbers earlier in the year, and COVID is accelerating these trends. Where is Christianity growing right now? In the global south- in South American and Africa. On a large

scale, scholars wonder if – allegorically – God has moved the wedding banquet to where people will respond to the invitation.

As the church universal, we have embraced Jesus, but we are still known to run off the prophets. What are some of our current day prophets saying about the kingdom of God that we don't want to hear? Which parts of do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God do we struggle with?

On a personal level, God invites us all to the banquet - to salvation – but we have the free will to choose to respond or not. When we do respond, we must do so with our whole hearts. The invitation is one that should not just change our schedule, but it is one that should change our lives. We must change our clothes. In Colossians, Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with compassions, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (sounds familiar doesn't it?). Then he adds, “Bear with one another, and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other.” Above all, he says, “Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” These are incredibly relevant words for our divided world.

Friends, may we all heed the call to come and may we come ready to don our wedding clothes for this life and beyond, and may we welcome all to join us. Amen.