

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A  
October 15, 2023  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson  
Matthew 22:1-14

### “Wedding Expectations”

One of the great privileges of my vocation is getting to walk with couples as they prepare to get married and join their lives together. While it is a joyous occasion, planning a wedding can be one of the most stressful things a couple will go through in their life together. There are so many expectations to manage from one’s own of making this the most special day of your life, to the families of the couple, not to mention the cacophony of voices from the massive wedding industry and social media. It is overwhelming to say the least. And the piece of advice that I most often give to couples is to pick just a handful of things that they actually care about to spend their mental and emotional energy on their wedding day, the rest either be delegated to someone, or quickly decided on – no need to hem and haw over ivory or bone table cloths, or just let go all together. In planning the ceremony I try to help a couple understand their wedding as a reverent time of worship and a reflection of their values as a couple. In reading a few stories of people reflecting on their wedding day, one regret that seems to be common is letting others expectations win the day instead of staying true to one’s own wants for such a momentous occasion.

In the parable from today’s scripture, we have a king whose behavior puts to shame even the worst “bridezilla.” And as we approach this parable we must keep in mind that parables, while great teaching tools, are not meant to be taken literally and they are not neat allegories with characters who align perfectly with God, Jesus, humanity, good, and evil, etc. in a moral tale perfectly wrapped up in an easy to understand bow. Like any good Rabbi, often Jesus’ parables were not simplistic, but rather complicated and multifaceted on purpose as he worked explain something as mysterious and inexplicable as the Kingdom of Heaven and the nature of God. This is part of why I think we return to parables again and again and can glean new insight and understanding each time we encounter them. In

doing my research and preparations on this text for the sermon this morning, I have found that among the commentators and preachers I consulted there seemed to be an overarching consensus on this parable. Much to my chagrin, the agreement is not on an authoritative interpretation of this parable, but rather among Jesus' parables, this one stands out as among the worst to understand and interpret. So if you're scratching your head this morning, trust me you are not alone!

This parable occurs in Matthew's narrative during Holy Week, shortly after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As Jesus enters the temple, his authority – the authority by which he has been healing and forgiving sins, preaching and teaching, is questioned by the religious elite. He then tells 3 parables – parables that shatter norms and question the status quo of righteousness and all notions of who is included and who is left out of the kingdom of God.

Now as we delve deeper into gleaning meaning from today's complicated parable, what I first want to make clear is what this parable is not about. It is not about the Jews who first rejected Jesus and then later the Gentiles who received the invitation and accepted the Gospel message. We have to remember that Jesus was distinctly Jewish and the community that Matthew was writing to was also Jewish. This is a point that should probably always be made, but in light of recent events is particularly important that keep in mind as we make our interpretation today. This parable is extreme and hyperbolic on purpose so as to be subversive and catch people's attention, and like the parables before it, it is about defying expectations and what it means to fully participate in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The part of the parable that leaves me the most uneasy and the most unsettled, is not the extreme violence, displayed by both the initial invited guests who hurt and kill the slaves of the king and then the retaliatory action by the king to burn the city to the ground, but it is the king's reaction to the man who shows up to the banquet without the proper wedding attire. The king has just extended to both the "good and the bad" of the city a most generous invitation to feast with him in joy and excess and opulence, and when someone shows up without the right clothes – clothes that perhaps they don't own and can't afford, instead of flinging open to the doors to his own rich wardrobe, the king casts out this guest into a place of darkness and suffering, saying "many will be called, but few are chosen." Settling

into the discomfort of these words, here is where I think the parable takes a turn and it's no longer about the invitation anymore. It's about what do we when we show up to the feast. How do we fully participate in the Kingdom of Heaven, in the life abundant, of which we have been freely called and welcomed into?

20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, helps us make this distinction between the generous invitation and response of full participation with his concept of cheap and costly grace. Bonhoeffer wrote in the context of the rise and then the full power of Nazi regime in Germany, and eventually he will be imprisoned and killed by the Nazis for his theological positions. Bonhoeffer says, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate..."

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him...

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."<sup>1</sup>

Now another important thought leader for the Christian community, the Apostle Paul, puts this it this way in his letter to the Colossians as he describes the new life of Christ –

"Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. 1937.

another, forgive each other; just as the Lord<sup>14</sup> has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. “

When we “put on Christ,” as Paul writes, this I propose is the proper the wedding attire we are to wear in order to fully in the extravagant feast of the Kingdom of Heaven. Like Bonhoeffer’s costly grace, it does require something of us. Showing up is only half the equation, we must also respond with the transformation of our lives in ways that reflect the extravagance and beauty of this gift. Just like we wouldn’t expect someone to show up to run a marathon in jeans and flip flops, we can’t actually enjoy the feast if we don’t show up clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and above all love. To try and do otherwise would leave us in a place of darkness, a place on the outside looking in.

Unlike the king in our parable, God’s invitation is not a limited time offer, it’s not even a one and you’re done. Over and over again God extends to us the invitation to this heavenly banquet, to the life abundant of the kingdom of God. We are both the guests who were invited, but decided that other things were more important and we are the ones who do show up. So here is my challenge for us today – to keep showing up and putting on the wedding clothes of Christ - even when they may feel itchy and uncomfortable, even when we many need help from our friends and the community to dress us. Accept the invitation and show up, dress out in love, and join the feast, fully participating in the promises of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessing by William Sloane Coffin –

*“May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short,  
the grace to risk something big for something good,  
the grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth,  
and too small for anything but love.”*<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Consulted works/commentaries –

Kim, Yung Suk. “Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14.” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-9>

Tew, Anna. “Stewardship Sunday #3 – The Terrible Parable and the Banquet for All: Finding Joy”

<https://overcaffeinatedlutheran.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/stewardship-sunday-3-the-terrible-parable-and-the-banquet-for-all-finding-joy/>

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Bolz-Webber, Nadia. "Sermon on the Worst Parable Ever."

[https://www.goodreads.com/author\\_blog\\_posts/1634206-sermon-on-the-worst-parable-ever](https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/1634206-sermon-on-the-worst-parable-ever)