



Scripture & Sermon

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October 4, 2020

Matthew 22:1-14

22 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.”

Gracious and Loving God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

When I started working on this sermon at the beginning of the week, I thought I would have a perfect illustration to break us into this passage. Instead of a wedding, I went to a funeral of sorts this week. My grandpa passed from COVID in early April, just after Holy Week, and it was still early enough then that people were not even thinking about gathering for funerals. So he was cremated and my grandma has had his ashes since. The thing about delayed events like that, especially in 2020, is if you don't have it right away, the big question becomes, when DO we hold a funeral? So, with the pandemic ongoing, it was decided that we would just have a burial and not a whole service. It came together fairly quickly and Brennen and I chose to make the trip out to the East side to attend. Now, when thinking of this sermon, I was thinking that a funeral like this would be the perfect example of some of what happens in this passage. At the end, the King berates one of the guests for not wearing a wedding robe. His punishment is way out of proportion, but the idea stands that the one who didn't change into the expected attire for the occasion doesn't belong. So, I was going to compare it to how we made sure to wear black for this burial service as it is what we know are the expectations for funerals. That part is true, Brennen and I did wear business casual black, but apparently that wasn't assumed. Even though we felt we were dressed properly and not out of place for a funeral, both of my parents, my aunt and uncle, and grandma all complimented us for wearing black and put in little effort to be wearing black themselves. Instead of us avoiding the more normal level of negative social consequences of not fitting the dress code, we ended up getting much more positive affirmation for seemingly going above and beyond. So, alas, my example for this sermon was thwarted.

Perhaps a better example in these times is like when we go to the store. Everyone is welcome to come into a store, but there is a new dress code these days. We are required to wear a mask when entering any establishment. So, if we don't we would likely be approached by an employee in a similar way to the man in the parable, "Friend, how did you get in here without a mask?" If we don't wear one, we could be kicked out like the man without a wedding robe. Though, hopefully Target isn't binding us and throwing us into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We have been asked to make a change to the way we behave for the best of all. Perhaps thinking of this parable in the terms of mask wearing instead of just not wearing the right robe to a party, can help us understand the underlying message of this parable.

Let's explore this passage in a bit more depth before we figure out how to apply it to our lives. First, the context. This passage immediately follows the texts from the last two weeks. Since this is the third week we have been in this scene, I will give only a quick reminder of the context. This scene is the conclusion of an argument between Jesus and the chief priests and elders held at the Temple on the day after what we call Palm Sunday. The tensions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders have grown over Jesus's ministry as the Jewish leaders did not believe he was the Messiah and did not like that Jesus was trying to reform the way they do things. Jesus is frustrated with these leaders in Jerusalem in particular because of the ways that the temple and their practice of Judaism had become corrupted by the influences of power and

money. Jesus knew, and we know in hindsight, that that tension was about to come to a head with the arrest, torture, and killing of Jesus. This discourse between Jesus and the Jewish leaders shows Jesus holding nothing back and letting them have it. This particular conversation is sparked by the Leaders asking Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus first flips the leader's wit trap back on them, and then tells the three parables. The first we discussed two weeks ago, the story of the man with two sons who responded to the request to work in the field differently. That parable focuses on the idea of following God's authority over our own or others' authority. Last week we discussed the second parable, of the wicked tenants who rebelled against the landowner by trying to take over the vineyard for themselves. This parable reminds us to work with God's Will to bring flourishing for all of the people in God's Vineyard. This third parable follows the theme of a parable telling of a seemingly normal situation that has some unusual outcomes and some unrealistic elements. It is those unusual and unrealistic elements that tell us the one who wrote it down wanted us to think of these stories allegorically. This means that the story parallels the thing in real life that the teller is trying to teach about.

This morning's story tells of a King who is hosting a wedding banquet. Due to ancient Jewish and Greek culture that would have been known by the original hearers of Matthew, it would have been assumed that those who were originally visited by the servants would have received an invitation much in advance of the day of and they would have accepted or rejected the invitation at that point. This story picks up with the practice of sending out a courtesy reminder that the party day had arrived. It reminds me of our practices today of sending out Save-the-Dates and later an official invitation. Alas, despite the fact that those people had accepted the invitation before, all of them now refuse to come on the day. Even further, when the King sends a second set of servants, they are killed! One of the unrealistic elements of the story is that at this point it says the King wages war while dinner waits on the table. Though the King's affronted reaction is not so crazy, as refusing a King's invitation, especially as a unified group like that would have suggested conspiracy or rebellion. Once that is settled the King decides to open the invitation to the banquet to everyone and sends servants to go gather people from the streets, filling the hall. A key phrase at this point is that the new guests included "both good and bad." Which is a phrase that many love when we start interpreting it for ourselves, but is also an foretelling of what is about to come when the King comes to see the guests. Before dealing with the King's reaction, first, let's break down what the issue is here. Though it is a last minute invitation, it is still an invitation to a wedding banquet, so a certain dress code was expected, particularly donning a wedding robe. Though unrealistic to assume that those gathered off the street into a banquet last minute would have their formalwear at the ready, within the realm of the story, all but one of the people do manage to come in the wedding best, so we should assume it should have been possible for all. That brings us to the most unusual part of the story, the King's reactive punishment, torture just for wearing the wrong robe to dinner.

Now, the allegorical meaning. Biblical scholars conclude that this parable is an allegory of salvation history or the journey that God's people have taken with who is accepted into salvation. At the point that Matthew was writing this, there were three stages considered: the sending of the prophets, renewed invitation by Christian missionaries, and looking ahead to the last judgment. Let's run through each of the allegorical parallels. The wedding banquet

represents the messianic banquet, or the shared banquet in heaven with Jesus, we often talk about the messianic banquet around communion. The King, like the landowner in last week's parable represents God and his son, Jesus. The King invites the guests who had agreed to come, which represents Israel, or the Jewish peoples. The servants who bring the first reminder invitation represent the Hebrew prophets and the second set of servants who bring the second reminder invitation represent the early Christian missionaries. The wedding robe itself does not represent anything, but the idea of putting on new clothes is an image often used in the early church to talk about the idea of taking on the new identity of Christian with conversion.

When we think of the story in those terms, it tells us of God's original invitation to the Israelites who accepted God's covenant but then had a lackluster response to the prophets. God is patient though, and sends a second round of invitation seen in the Christian missionaries. The abuse of those servants in the story is a direct parallel to how the missionaries were mistreated and killed. The way that the second invitation by God is received by the people is what triggers the destruction of their city. This is likely a reference to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem that happened between Jesus's ascension and when Matthew wrote this Gospel. The destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans was a huge world-rocking event and at that time was thought to be the consequences of the judgment of God on the rebellious people of Israel. Alas, those who had gotten the invitation before have been judged and the hall remains empty. So, God sends Christian missionaries again, the words used with this final invitation reflecting those of the Great Commission of Matthew 28, as the invitation is opened to everyone and anyone. The last part, the reaction of the King, oozes theological meaning, particularly because of the classic image of Christian conversion as putting on a new set of clothes. The story plus that theological meaning point us toward understanding the idea of the one wearing the wrong robe as those who accept God's invitation to join the Kingdom but then take it for granted and don't put in their own work to live into what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Similar to the other two parables we have explored, this one points to where the people of God have been, the ways they have gone wrong, and warns them of where they continue to go wrong, thus warning us of how we can do better as followers of God. This parable reminds us that God invites all to fully join in the Kingdom of Heaven. With that, we are reminded that we should not take it for granted, we should not say we are Christian but do nothing about it. We should not accept God's invitation to faith and then think, "Cool, I'm in, I'm good, I'm set for life." We shouldn't be the ones who show up to church or call upon Christ for help when we need it, but are not willing to change. God does recognize the difference, like the person who shows up to a wedding in sweatpants or to a funeral in hot pink, the invitation to the wedding banquet of Jesus requires that we take off our day-to-day clothing and put on the clothes of Christ, then we can enjoy the party. If we don't meet those expectations, then we will be held accountable, not literally in the way that the man is punished by the King, but in the ways we would be separated from God.

We who identify as Christian have our own responsibilities to uphold. Just like those being invited to a wedding know to dress up, we are expected to understand that living as a Christian requires us to be in the world differently. The scriptures, the prophets who first invited the Israelites to the active movement of God in the world, the teachings of Jesus, the writings of Paul all build for us a road map of the ways that Jesus expects us to live differently in the world.

We are unlikely to get all of it right all the time, but we are to work to be transformed and change our ways toward the justice, love, and grace that God wants us to treat each other with.

This is what sanctifying grace is all about. As United Methodists we love to talk about grace, and we consider there to be 3 experiences of Grace, prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. Prevenient grace is how we experience grace all around us, all the time, no matter our current relationship with God. We truly do not deserve it, but our God is gracious and generous and works around us in ways we see and don't see. Justifying grace is the grace we experience when we receive the invitation from Christ to come to the wedding party, the invitation from God to commit to being a part of the Kingdom of God. Sanctifying grace is the grace we experience after we accept the invitation, and take off our everyday clothes to put on the wedding robe. That makes it sound simple and quick, but it is actually thought of to be a lifelong process toward perfection. It is God's sanctifying grace that helps us to figure out what we need to change to be more like Jesus and that helps us to make the changes themselves. Sometimes a change is simple and quick, like giving some more of our money to a good cause at Christmas. Sometimes a change is more complex and takes time, like dismantling the isms that have been baked into our brains. The cool and frustrating part of sanctification is that it is something we will work on our whole lives. It's cool because we can all find hope in knowing that no one is perfect and everyone should be working on themselves in some way. But it is also frustrating because change is hard. We almost never like change around us or having to do it ourselves. Change brings on complicated feelings and makes us face the ways we are imperfect. Good news is, we aren't alone. Just as all those who were invited to the wedding banquet had to get their wedding robes on, all of us Christians should be working on transforming ourselves toward God's expectations of us. We are in this together and we are in this with God. We can work on change together, helping each other see our blind spots of where we could do better. We can rely on God to give us the wisdom, strength, and guidance we need when we get stuck. If we work with God and with each other relying on grace to transform more and more toward God's hopes for us, imagine what we could be as a church, as a community. To borrow images from last week's parable, imagine the fruits that we could see flourish amongst us.

Unlike the robe in the story, the work we have to do to put on the clothes of Christ is not so much a one and done. As the first parable reminded us, we make changes by following God's standards, God's authority for our lives over our own or others. As the second parable reminded us, we can know we are making the right changes as we see evidence of that work in the fruit that we bear, in the flourishing that comes from us. This parable reminds us of our invitation to be a part of the Kingdom of God, a part of the heavenly banquet, but emphasizes that we must be willing to put in the work of shifting our focus to God's authority on our lives and not just in word or belief but in action as will be evident by the works we do. So let us accept God's invitation and show up in our wedding best, making the changes that are expected to join in the festivities.

These last 4 weeks I have been blessed by being a part of the Finding Peace in an Anxious World book study. That study is based around the Serenity Prayer, and though a prayer most often used to help in moments of stress and anxiety, I couldn't help but be reminded of it as I delved into this passage. This week in the study we have been discussing the third line,

"Courage to change the things I can." A lot of times change requires courage, and especially so when we are having to change ourselves. So, I thought, instead of praying my own words this morning, I would lift us all in the words of the Serenity Prayer, may we all be given some serenity, acceptance, courage, and wisdom as we put on our own wedding robes. If you know the words of the Serenity prayer, feel free to join me.

God, Grant us the serenity, to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

I will continue with the extended version of this prayer:

Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world As it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right If I surrender to His Will; So that I may be reasonably happy in this life And supremely happy with Him Forever and ever in the next. Amen.