

Sermon: Preparing for a Banquet

Matthew 22:1-14

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

You know...when I read this passage and saw that it was the Gospel text for today I really thought about picking a different scripture. I couldn't help but think..."really, another parable?" "Really? Another tough parable" at that. But whenever I feel myself pushing against a text I tend to need to stick with it and see what it has for us. So I did. And I hope, that even in the midst of a story that feels harsh, maybe confusing or upsetting, that we can still find some good news. And I think we will, while also with some challenge for our own lives.

Before we dig in, I think it's important to remember that this is a story that Jesus told in order to convey something to his audience. Stories are often...less than realistic, and there are many aspects of this story that tell me, and others who have studied it, that it's truly a bit absurd, let alone unsettling. So hold that

in mind as we journey together today, and keep in mind that there's a whole lot more we could explore within this text than we can get to in one sermon.

I titled this sermon "Preparing for a Banquet" because there are two aspects of preparation happening that I think are important for us to attend to. The first is that of the host. The King had planned a banquet for his son's wedding, and when it was time for the feast and festivities he sent out servants to call those who had been invited, I'm sure, expecting a gathering full of celebration, good food, and good wine with those he had intentionally prepared it for. But instead of accepting the invitation, his invited guests chose instead to continue on with their own to-do lists and whatever else they had become preoccupied with, including the mistreatment and killing of those who had been sent with the invitation. (Here's the 1st absurd thing, why would they do this? Feels a bit extreme, right?)

If we're following the host, I can empathize with him a bit as someone who enjoys hosting myself. I can imagine how upset he may have been. Perhaps you too can picture how baffling and upsetting it might be to prepare an entire banquet only for the people you invited to blow off your invite at the last minute. And as a king we can presume that invite list was full of rich and powerful leaders; who can imagine them being so disrespectful?... Let alone harming the ones you had sent with the invitation?

But instead of calling the whole thing off, what does the host do? Well, first, his anger takes over and he destroys the ones who murdered his servants (which is the 2nd absurd aspect as he releases chaos among his own people and city), but then in the midst of that chaos, chooses to throw the invitation wide, calling and inviting "the good and bad," any who were around to the feast! I'm not sure if I would be excited or not to receive an invite if I had been watching what was going on in the city throughout that day, but nonetheless, many were invited, without discrimination, and joined for the celebration.

Minister and theology professor, Anna Case-Winters, says, “The extraordinary shift in the parable is its transition from an exclusive party of invited guests to a party of “invite everyone you find”. This is consistent with the widening circle of inclusion that has been opening in the Gospel. “The banquet now taking place...is not a banquet for the selected few, not for the social elite, not for the politically powerful, not for the religious insiders. These people have boycotted it. And now it has become a banquet for the people—outcasts and strangers. There is something quite shocking about the openness of the invitation, now yielding a hall “filled with guests.” (Belief Commentary, p.256)

This is where I want to shift a bit to the preparation of the guests. Clearly the initial guest list was ill-prepared to accept the invitation as they responded so poorly (or not at all), but this second round of guests are ill-prepared too, just in a different way. These guests, instead of ignoring the invite at the last minute, are *accepting* the invite at the last minute. And yet, they do accept the invitation! The banquet hall is filled with people of all kinds, of all classes, of all ages and abilities. What a beautiful picture of community and the kingdom of God! How I wish this is where the allegory ended. Unfortunately it is not.

While this is where the version of this story ends in the Gospel of Luke, Matthew seems to add on another ending. We get this odd addition of a guest, who was *just* invited, accepting the invitation but not wearing a wedding robe, and the king gets upset by this. Now, I’m over here thinking “of course he doesn’t have a robe! Have some grace for the guy!” But instead he is thrown out, rather harshly, and we end on this sentence “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Not going to lie, I don’t love that. It doesn’t sit right with me. Especially after seeing this wide welcome just a verse or two before. So what’s going on here? It, again, feels a bit absurd.

Many commentaries here describe, helpfully, that this portion of the story exists to show that even when there is a generous invitation, guests must still

show up “clothed” or behaving in such a way that aligns with the standards of the party. You can’t go on behaving like you’re not at such an extraordinary feast. One commentary put it this way, “... The wedding feast is not the church but the age to come. The required garment is righteousness, that is, behavior in accordance with Jesus’ teachings. The man is speechless because he has no defense; he accepted the invitation of the gospel, but refused to conform his life to the gospel.” (Interpretation Commentary, p.252)

Just like the complacent and harmful folks who were initially invited but didn’t attend, this guest while he did accept the invite didn’t actually change his approach. He wasn’t “clothed” appropriately. To put on the wedding robe of the king, is to put on the garments of Christ, and this guest wasn’t wearing it.

I can’t help but think of many leaders in our country today, parading and claiming the gospel of Christ while behaving in a way that declares the opposite through the glorification of power and dominance. Calling on the name of Jesus in one breath, while announcing publicly televised executions in the next. Praying and singing songs of praise on the White House lawn in one moment, while denying care for the poor, the widow, and the refugee in the next, the very people whom Jesus served and identified himself. Jesus said “whatever you do to the least of these is what you do to me.” And this is the clothing that the guests are being called to put on when they, when we, accept the invitation to the banquet (or the kingdom of God). Not because we need to look a certain way, there’s an abundance of diversity afterall, but because we need to embody the likeness of the God who invites us.

There are many scriptures throughout the Bible that talk about being clothed in Christ or being made new, all with themes of unity, love, mercy, compassion, righteousness, letting go of old ways and embracing the new...all of which can be summarized in the call we receive to love God and love our

neighbors as we love ourselves. If we accept this call, this invitation, we can't just speak it with our lips. We must live it with our whole lives.

So in preparing for a banquet, we have our host, who ultimately throws the invitation wide and invites any and all who will accept the invite, and we have the guests, who either accept it or don't, but if they do must do so with a willingness to put on new clothes, a new life, that display the love and welcome of God. This is the way many are called but few are chosen. Less in the sense of a select few getting in, and more in the sense of whether we accept the wide welcome of God in a way that is reflected in our whole lives. Ultimately, the pious and powerful, the "expected guests," were the ones who denied the call to attend and then were denied themselves, only then for the welcome to become even greater, including all who would accept the invitation. The kingdom of heaven then is full of those who, no matter when the invite was sent, are prepared for the banquet. The trick is we just have to be ready for the party by putting on our new robes.

I wonder what ways we might be accepting the invitation to the feast, to the kingdom of God, with our lips but not with our actions? What are the ways we proclaim to be a part of the good news story, while acting out another one? My hope is that we will honestly examine our lives and choose, each day, even if imperfectly, to put on our wedding robes – being clothed in the mercy, love, grace, and the peace of Christ, as we join the party.