



We Just Wanted a Simple Wedding

TEXT
Matthew 22:1-14

July 3, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I was officiating a wedding in Florida. I walked in with the groom and the groomsmen. The bridesmaids processed in, all 11 of them. Then the bride walked in.

I told the crowd to be seated. It was then that I noticed a couple trying to exit. They were seated in the middle of the pew, so they shuffled to the center aisle and left through the narthex.

It's unusual to attend a wedding procession and skip the rest of the wedding, but I didn't think any more about it until lunch with Rick. He was the pastor of the Methodist Church right next door.

I told him I had a couple walk out of my wedding on Saturday. He smiled. It turns out they were at the wrong wedding. The Methodists were having a wedding at the same time, and this couple got the Presbyterian church and the Methodist church confused. It was only when the bride came in that they realized they were at the wrong wedding.

There's not much protocol to weddings these days. They cost a lot more than they used to. Well, the weddings are cheap; it's the receptions that kill you. But there is not as much protocol. But it's still good to know whose wedding you are attending.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a wedding banquet for the king's son. You know whose son we are talking about, right? Well, it was supposed to be a simple wedding — but no such luck.

As I said on the front of the bulletin, this wedding banquet may be one you would rather skip.

It is important to remember this is a story, not a news account. And Jesus is the storyteller, with an extra dose of hyperbole thrown in by his editor, Matthew. Matthew loves hyperbole.

To talk about this wedding banquet is to talk about the kingdom. And to talk about the kingdom is to talk about God's work of grace in the world — God's invitation to God's people to be at God's party. This wedding story can't be understood without remembering the story behind the story.

The story behind the story: Prophets invited God's people to come to the party. Some of them were killed. Jesus invited ... many made light of his invitation.

The Romans destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple right down to the foundation. There would be some in Matthew's congregation who would

remember that. They would remember all of this.

And then, as a result of Paul's preaching, Gentiles, both good and bad, started coming in off the street, showing up singing "Amazing grace ... that saved a wretch like me." This is the story behind the story.¹

The story? The invited guests wouldn't come to the party. It was a gracious invitation, but the invited guests made light of it. That's what the text says: They made light of it. They sent excuses.

When Luke tells this same story, he focuses on these excuses. I will turn to that story in a few weeks, but today I want to focus on what Matthew adds to the story: the wedding garment.

The king finally gets his banquet hall filled. His messengers go out into the streets and bring in just anybody — everybody. But then the king notices a guy without a wedding garment and tosses him out — as Matthew says, into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew is just using language to catch our attention because this is important.

In summers of my childhood, family vacations usually meant a visit to our grandparents, who lived out of state. I loved to

visit my grandparents. My grandmother had a way of making me feel like I was the most important human being in the world. We would pull in the driveway. She would be on the front porch. “Get over here,” she would say. “I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays.” She talked like that. “You are getting so big; just look at you. Now get over here and give me a hug!”

Nobody treats you like that. Think about it. When is the last time you showed up at work and someone said, “Get over here and give me a hug! Look at you — you are getting so big”? Just grandparents.

But that same grandmother, who greeted me with hugs and made peach cobbler just because it was my favorite, if she saw me thwack my younger brother (because he was annoying and deserved it) would say, “Tom, you do that again, and I will hang you by your thumbs!” Really? This woman? My thumbs?

No, not in a million years. It was just grandmother language to say “This is important. Be kind to each other; it matters.”

I think Matthew was a grandmother. He talks like one: weeping and gnashing of teeth. He’s saying, *The king’s banquet is important. Don’t make light of it. The kingdom of heaven matters.*

But what’s with this wedding garment? I mean the guy got picked up off the street. He probably didn’t think that morning, “Well, I’d better throw a wedding garment in my lunch box, just in case.”² This king, who insists they all be invited, now tosses him out because he

didn’t have the right garment? What’s that about?

I got invited to a Christmas party. I wrote down the time and the date, then tossed the invitation. That was a mistake. I’m sure the dress code was mentioned on the invitation.

I showed up, and everyone was dressed to the nines: black tie; dresses that glittered. I don’t even own a tux. There I was in my Christmas sweater. I stepped into the foyer (I should say “foy-eh”). I took one look around and decided I should leave. But I was too slow. Like our vigilant king, the host spotted me. “Tom, so glad you could make it. Come here, let me introduce you to everyone.” It was an awkward 15 minutes, me and my Christmas sweater. I would have grabbed a tray and started serving beverages, but those guys were dressed better than I was.

But here’s the thing: The host didn’t throw me out. I can imagine the fun conversation he had at breakfast the next morning, but he didn’t throw me out.

What’s so important about a wedding garment?

I was talking with a friend recently. I said, “You should come to Village sometime. I think you would like the people there.”

“What should I wear?” he asked.

“Clothes,” I said. “We are big on clothes; but other than that, if you come, I don’t care what you wear.”

Why does this poor guy get tossed? Well, it’s not because he didn’t change his clothes. It’s because he didn’t change his heart. Clothing is a metaphor.

In the early church, when new converts to the church were baptized, they put on a new baptismal garment. The old was cast aside, the new garment was worn. It was a symbol of claiming a new life in Christ, of becoming a new person — or at least being on the journey to become the person Christ calls you to be.

It is this baptismal garment that Ephesians has in mind when it reads, “Clothe yourselves with the new self.”³ It’s all over the New Testament. Colossians reads, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.”⁴

And then Paul says in Galatians, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”⁵ These are the clothes we wear at the king’s banquet.

Matthew says, “You have been invited.” That’s grace. Don’t make light of grace. Don’t be casual about the love of God in your life. You don’t get invited to the king’s banquet and belly up to the shrimp cocktail, wiping your sticky fingers on your T-shirt. You don’t do that if you remember whose banquet it is.

This guy evidently forgot whose banquet he was attending. He thought it was just for him. He forgot this was the son’s banquet.

This is a story about grace — about the gracious love of God that calls you by name and says, “I want you at my party.” But this is a story that reveals that grace has expectations.

My brother is eight years younger than me. I remember

one Mother's Day. I gave my mother a handmade card and some craft I made in Sunday school. She loved it.

My baby brother didn't make her anything — did not know it was Mother's Day. I wasn't going to help him out. So he went out into our backyard, picked a yellow dandelion and came in and said, "Mom, this is for you."

She put that weed in a vase on the kitchen table. I get that now. But you only smile because you know he was four. If he did that when he was 44 — "Here, I picked this myself, it's for you" — well, then that guy is making light of the love in his life. That's a guy without a wedding garment. Am I making sense?

Grace is unconditional, but it is not without expectation. We are invited to the banquet, but it's not our banquet; it's not our kingdom. It belongs to the son. So we are to clothe ourselves like him: grace, justice, kindness, love. That's what you wear in the kingdom.

This week we celebrate yet again the birth of this nation and the ever-fragile experiment of democracy. We need this day. We need this celebration, as it gives us a day to remember what is most important to us as a people; to reflect on what matters to this nation. We need this day particularly in years like this one because it is an election year.

Campaigns don't often focus on what's most important to us as a people. Too often campaigns are immaturity festivals. Maybe they always were. Campaigns invite us to think about ourselves more than our neighbor. They

invite us to assume we are 100 percent right, and the other is 100 percent wrong — and that's just foolish.

Too often campaigns tell us the answer is beating the bad guys. But those of us who have been invited to the banquet know that the real calling is to do our best to strive to *become* the good guys. Campaigns seduce us into being driven by our fears, rather than shaped by our hopes. Campaigns speak of freedom only as a right, seldom as a responsibility. They too often make light of that which is important.

This crazy wedding banquet is an important story. It declares that you are loved, and the party won't be the same without you. God's love comes to us where we are; but love, real love, never leaves us as we are.

There are grace expectations. That's why we strive to clothe ourselves as he would. After all, it's not our banquet. The king has thrown this party for his son. When we remember whose party it is, we will want to pay attention to what we are wearing.

And besides, you don't want the host to cast you out into outer darkness where my grandmother is waiting to hang you up by your thumbs.

¹I am grateful to Barbara Brown Taylor, "Wedding Dress," *Home by Another Way* (1999), p. 192, for the simple way she makes this point.

²I am grateful to Tom Long for this observation — but more importantly, for his great insight

into the significance of the wedding garment.

³Ephesians 4:24

⁴Colossians 3:12

⁵Galatians 3:27

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.