



# Grace Expectations

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 22:1-14

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July 18, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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Jesus told lots of stories. They were all about the kingdom—the promised day of God. It obviously remains a foreign concept to us, so he had to keep telling these stories over and over and over again.

As we have learned, he told lots of stories about seeds and weeds but the other subject he loved to talk about was mealtime and parties. Most of the stories about feasts are found in Luke's gospel. It seems, among the gospel writers, Luke was the foodie and loved to eat.

But the parable of the wedding banquet is one that we find in Matthew. Matthew takes this parable and edits a bit, I think. You can sense Matthew's fingerprints in this story because Matthew loves hyperbole.

The story goes: Guests are invited to the wedding banquet of the king's son. I've watched how people got a little crazy when Prince William or Prince Harry got married. You've seen how people react to a royal wedding. Oh, they go nuts. It's the leading news story for weeks. Well, we can assume that the invitation to the king's wedding banquet was a coveted invitation. But there is a surprise here. When the dinner bell rings, the guests dis the king. They begin to make excuses. Matthew doesn't dwell on the excuses; he just says they 'made light of the invitation.' They also killed the folks who brought the invitation. Never heard of 'don't shoot the messenger,' I suppose.

The excuses are offered and the host responds the way you might expect the host to respond: He sends troops to kill the ungrateful invitees. Sounds like the kingdom, right? And then he compels folks off the street—folks who had not been invited to begin with—to bring in whoever they find. So they went out and they invited anyone they found, all are

welcome, both good and bad, it says. Both good and bad. Your lucky day! The king has invited you to the wedding banquet. Come in and enjoy. Just when we hope the story would become a bit better, it takes a turn for the worse.

The king—in the midst of the feast to celebrate his son—spots a guy over by the punch bowl who doesn't have a wedding garment. Evidently, he forgot to put one in his lunch box when he went out that morning. Let that be a lesson to you: Never leave home without a wedding garment. So, the host does the only reasonable thing: He cast the guy out of the banquet—not just back on the street where he came from. Oh no. He is cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus says: God's promised day is like that. Really? Weeping and gnashing of teeth?

In the 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 and 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 was the last time you showed up at work and someone said, "I haven't seen you in a month of Sundays. Get over here and give me a hug"? 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), she would say, "Tom, you do that again and I will

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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. Stop hitting your brother. It’s important.

I think Matthew was a grandmother. At least he talks like one. He’s trying to say something is of utmost importance. It’s really important to wear a wedding garment. If you don’t, you get tossed out of the party. But why?

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 but I didn’t write that down.

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 (or should I say foyeh?) and 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 and let me introduce you to everyone.” Everyone? No, that’s okay. 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. He said, “I’ve been thinking about going back to church. I haven’t been since I was a kid. Now that I have my vaccinations, I’m getting out some.” I said, “You should come to Village. 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, I don’t care what you wear.” (I feel that I should say, after this COVID pandemic year, that pajamas are

not clothes. I am grateful that you changed to come today.)

Why does this poor guy get tossed? Well, it’s not because he didn’t change his clothes. If I understand the text, like the first guest who refused to come, he made light of the invitation. 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 and 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.”<sup>1</sup> Colossians reads, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.”<sup>2</sup> And when Paul says in Galatians, “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”<sup>3</sup> These are the clothes we wear at the king’s banquet.

In baptism, we proclaim that we belong to God not because of anything in our hearts, but because of the love that lives in God’s heart. It’s grace. You don’t earn it and you can’t make it happen; it is God and God alone who invites you to the party. But that love is not something we should take lightly. It is a love that changes us.

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.<sup>4</sup> You don’t do that if you remember whose banquet it is.

When I entered the second grade, Mrs. Fleming was my teacher. She was a seating-chart teacher and assigned us seats in alphabetical order. But it was also divided with girls on one side of the room and boys on the other. The first day of class she started calling out our names and directing us to the proper seats.

“Bobby Addison? Right over here. You will sit in the first boy chair.” “Laura Alexander? Here, darling.

1 Ephesians 4:24

2 Colossians 3:12

3 Galatians 3:27

4 I am grateful to Tom Long for this image. Long also provided the phrase, “forgetting the wedding garment in the lunchbox.”

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Right here.” “Umm. I’m not sure if this is a boy or girl... first name is Tom, middle name Lorraine. Is Tom short for Tomacina?” Oh, the teasing was endless.

I went home that day and complained to my dad. “Why did you name me Lorraine?” “Well, you are a Junior,” he said. “I’m Thomas Lorraine and I wanted you to have my name—so you are Thomas Lorraine, Jr.” “Well, I hate my name,” I said. “I just hate it.” “Well, pick a new name if you like.”

I thought about Hank Aaron, but that one was taken. I made light of my name—of being a Junior. Such is the life of fathers and sons at times.

Last October, my dad came home from the hospital on hospice. He had a few days. My son (who, by the way, is not Lorraine the third) and I drove to Atlanta and sat by his hospice bed. He had me pull from the wall the picture he had taken himself of Hank Aaron hitting the home run that broke Babe Ruth’s record. He took me to that game and wanted me to have that photo.

I told him just how fortunate I was to be a Junior. It was an honor to carry his name. It’s not something I would ever make light of. Am I making

sense to you?

Jesus would tell us that there is nothing more important in our lives than our faith. Not our jobs, not our status, not our vacations, not our work. And our faith is lived in love.

There is no moment in our lives when we can afford to make light of that. It is of utmost importance, and if we forget to live defined by love, if we make light of the love in our lives, if we fail to value our friendships, if we neglect to treat others with justice, then we have missed the point of what we are for. We have wasted the day.

The love of God that is proclaimed at our baptism should define how we live in this world. It is a love that should live through us, and to miss that, well, I don’t know that it is evil as much as it is a waste.

It’s like being in the middle of a wedding banquet where everyone is dressed to the nines and acting like you are at QuikTrip.

To treat the love of God that way, we might as well be thrown out of the feast—thrown out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and my grandmother who is waiting to hang you by your thumbs.