

“What Not to Wear”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 22:1-14
March 24, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent

We start by placing five volunteers from the congregation in a timeline to gain a sense of the context for our parable. They line up at the front:



You've heard it from me time after time, how the parables of Jesus are tricky and must be handled carefully. If we aren't sent for a bit of a loop, we're not reading them in their fullness. If we think we understand them, we're likely way off. If we try to turn them into neat allegories where each character and object represents someone or something in a 1:1 relationship, we end up stripping them of their depth and mystery.

This morning's Gospel lesson is one of those parables that ought to come with a consumer warning. It's not for the faint of heart. It's not to be taken lightly or used carelessly. It's not to be discussed without its context. And that's why we have our volunteers up front.

I want us to be able to visualize a bit of a timeline here.

Matthew writes his Gospel somewhere around the years 80-90 [1], fifty or so years after Jesus walked the earth, and between a decade or two after the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 [2]. That destruction left Judaism in disarray, with its various groups looking for answers and a way forward. The split between Christianity and Judaism is still underway at this point — they're not two distinct groups — and so we need to hear this parable with an ear for Matthew trying to make sense of the chaos and making the case for the Jesus movement.

We also need to pay attention to the context within the narrative of the Gospel itself! When Luke includes this parable — it's a much tamer version — he has Jesus telling it on the way to Jerusalem. But not Matthew: He places it the morning after Palm Sunday [3 & 4]. So Jesus has just entered Jerusalem and caused a huge scene in the temple. The religious leaders are aching to arrest him, but they are afraid of the crowds who see Jesus as a prophet. In just three days Jesus will be in custody, arrested in the deep of night [5]. As he tells this parable, tension is high and has been ratcheting up. This is the scene in the movie when the leader gives the “here we go” speech. Think: *Remember the Titans*, *Hoosiers*, *Braveheart*, or *Independence Day*.

Having set the scene, let's listen for a parable that has all the wildness of an episode of *Game of Thrones*:

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, 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.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.

“The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to inspect the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Whew.

The other three Gospels, combined, only mention “weeping and gnashing of teeth” once. Matthew uses the phrase six times. This is the same Matthew whose Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and who tells followers to “become like children” and “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”¹

There is such love and grace and gentleness, but also urgency and judgment at hand. It’s so tempting to choose one part of Matthew’s Jesus and ignore the other. Is there a way to find truth in both?

We’ve got this very weird, almost cartoonishly absurd parable.

The wedding feast does not go off as expected. This was a big deal, a state affair, a royal wedding for which one clears one’s calendar! And yet, having been invited, the guests don’t show up. The king sends word about how absolutely fabulous this party’s going to be. Some of the invited make light of it. They carry on with business as usual.

Unexpected, but I guess it wouldn’t be much of a story without some dramatic tension.

The rest of the invited ones seize the servants and mistreat them and kill them. Whoa. That escalated quickly!

¹ Thanks to Greg Carey at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3870

The king responds with destruction and the burning of cities. Yikes. But we haven't reached peak-weirdness yet!

The party is still on! Cities are smoldering, but the deejay is already booked and the caterer has chicken, fish, and vegetarian entrees lined up, and the king opens the doors to anyone he can find — the good and the bad — and fills the hall.

I think it's pretty clear how Matthew wants his Jewish-Christian community to hear the story so far: Some were invited, they rebelled against the king, their city was destroyed, they weren't worthy, and the doors have been flung open.

And I think Matthew can handle us, with the benefit of history and hindsight, having a problem with that interpretation of events in our time. We steadfastly rebuke any theology today that would place the Jewish people outside of God's loving embrace. And we don't do that quietly, because the vile scourge of anti-Semitism is a persistent sin. So, modern and post-modern Christians, what is there for us in this parable?

Well, there's a party, first of all. If we zoom out for a second we recall that the reign of God is so often compared to and experienced as a feast. Jesus loved to party, to spend time at a table, to eat and to drink. There's invitation here, and it's an invitation that expands into the streets. It's not a fatalistic good list and naughty list of who's in and out, but an invitation to show up and revel in the party that God is throwing. This was supposed to be a joyful occasion. It was marred by disinterest and antagonism and ultimately violence.

How often does the life of faith feel like a party to you? Well, we do have quite a bit of fun here. But do you know who does this right? A group that meets here four times a week.

I'm almost always in my office when the Monday afternoon Alcoholics Anonymous meeting gathers down the hall. The leaders of that group show up to make coffee and they frequently stop to chat, because we've known each other for years. Nearly every week there's a new person at the meeting, and I hear the joy with which they are welcomed. When the meeting starts, I close my door, but they leave theirs open and I can hear them start with gusto and pray the Serenity Prayer and support one another through the hard moments. If someone is celebrating a milestone of sobriety the applause and whoops and cheers echo through this building. If you listen really carefully right after the meeting, you can hear these old bricks whispering, "I thought this was a Presbyterian Church!" That group knows how to celebrate.

Of course there is yet more weirdness to be found here. The king gives all the guests a once-over and discovers that one of them is not dressed for the occasion. "Friend," he says — and we noticed last week that this word for *friend* is only used three times in Matthew, and in each occasion it's used sort of sarcastically. It's what Jesus calls Judas as Judas kisses him to ID him for arrest. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And the man cannot answer, and so he is tossed out for some gnashing and weeping.

The Bible is rich with the metaphor of putting on clothing as taking on the ways of faith.

Whenever we have a funeral here, we read from the letter to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The imagery is carried through in the book of Revelation and it harkens back to Exodus and Daniel and the Psalms. And in this parable the question of what to wear and what not to wear calls through the centuries to us.

I remember the first few weeks in Birmingham, when Amber and I were church shopping. We visited a wonderful congregation with lovely music and a beautiful building and I was enjoying it until Amber leaned over during the offering and whispered, “I think you’re the only male in this place over the age of three who’s not wearing a tie and jacket.” I asked her if she could have waited until we returned to our car to point that out to me and she replied, “I *guess* so.”

We are a bit more relaxed here, with a fairly wide-range of dress. And yet, I became convinced this week that this bit about the wedding robe is crucial for us, the Edgewood faithful, whether we are here in jeans or far fancier garb.

20th Century theologian and Nazi-resister Karl Barth wrote about this parable that, “the invitation is to a feast and [the one] who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all.”² In short, showing up is not enough. More is expected of us.

This is something that evangelical churches are better at emphasizing. We in the historically mainline denominations have had a tendency to be so pleased when people show up — particularly as those denominations have shrunk in size — that we’re afraid to ask much of them, or ourselves. And that leads to a domesticated, boring gospel, not a feast gospel that requires party clothing. There’s a great line from Reinhold Niebuhr — another brilliant 20th Century pastor (he’s the one who gets the credit for the Serenity Prayer). Niebuhr wrote: ““I am not surprised that most prophets were itinerant. Many budding prophets over time become harmless parish priests.”³ Ouch.

Fear of accountability and of asking something more doesn’t serve us well at all. Our tradition and our denomination and this congregation in particular have so clear a call to wear the peace and hope and grace of Christ and to wear them boldly in a world that rejects a wild story of ever-expanding love. We cannot call ourselves partygoers if we show up but stay silent when the children of God are mistreated by the government, or structures of injustice, or the church.⁴

We have been invited, and so we had better slip on a wedding robe in place of any other outfit we might have picked out. We need to say no to wearing complacency at having found our way

² Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, II.2

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic

⁴ Karoline Lewis at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4980&fbclid=IwAR19cNKEEben7ttOhwkuwZIO7l2m14OhW56EnQUjA1PQsDk2Hmgh0qPWAXI>

into the party. We need to say no to a dull gospel, when what we have to offer is the truth of God's love for all, God's demands for care of the stranger, and God's vision of a peace that turns the world on its head. Those are beautiful garments. When we are afraid to wear them, we risk ending up outside the party in the weeping and gnashing abyss of irrelevance.

We have been given an opportunity to try on something new. In the fall, our church was chosen for a program through the Center for Congregational Resources at Samford University. The program is called "Life is Calling!" — and we've got a team that has begun work with experts to explore what kind of new projects or initiatives we might try to live out God's call to this community. There's a grant involved that will help us do something innovative, something wild, something feast-like. You'll be hearing about a congregational survey that we need you to complete. Here is one clear, practical way you can help this church wear its wedding robe — don't ignore the survey! We're going to be sharing a lot more information in the weeks ahead. Look out — God is up to something in our midst.

Three weeks from today we will celebrate Palm Sunday, and the tension will rise. We will have moved through this season of Lent and arrived at the holy city and there Christ will ask much of his disciples. He will ask them to stand with him. He will ask them to eat with him. He will ask them to remember him. He will ask them to stay awake. And they will struggle to remain convinced that this was the party they wanted to attend. The week will end poorly. There will be violence and death and weeping in the night. That story will have a twist at the end as well.

As we continue to look inside light and inside ourselves, consider these words from the letter to the Colossians:

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to [God] through him."

Amen.