

*The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...*  
*Part 7 – The Weirdest Wedding Ever*

Matthew 22:1-14

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ February 19, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

<sup>1</sup> Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. <sup>4</sup> 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.’ <sup>5</sup> But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup> while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup> Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup> and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup> 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.’ <sup>14</sup> For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:1-14, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

*Strange things can happen at weddings.* You’ve all been there. The bride’s faithful golden retriever walks down the aisle as the ring bearer. The best man reveals a few too many of the groom’s secrets with his alcohol fueled toast. The wedding cake melts and slides off its perch on a 105 degree day. The pastor can’t remember the name of the bride during the service. The wedding rings are nowhere to be found and a loud argument erupts between the happy couple. Grandpa tries to break out his old dance moves and ends up breaking something else instead.

*Strange things can happen at weddings.* But I don’t know if I have ever heard of a weirder wedding than the one we read about in today’s gospel.

Jesus tells a story of a king who sends his servants out to invite folks to the wedding of his son. Who doesn’t want to go to a royal wedding? Charles and Diana, William & Kate, (or if you are a PBS fan) Victoria and Albert. Wouldn’t you be there? And though these folks would have all gotten an initial invitation—a kind of 1st century “save the date” announcement, they are not the least bit interested when the time comes for the big day. *What a strange response to a wedding invitation.*

Though the king may have been offended, he gives it another shot and sends out his servants again, this time with a detailed explanation of the feast being prepared. Yet none of those invited want to attend. So they are off to their businesses and farms. In fact, some are not only disinterested in the feast - certain invitees are outwardly antagonistic. They decide to grab the king’s slaves, abuse them, and even kill them. *What a strange (and awful) response to a wedding invitation.* And you thought your wedding didn’t go well...

Finally the king wakes up to the insult and decides to get back for the lack of gratitude of these would be guests. He is in a rage, and not to be outdone by them he sends his army, kills all those who murdered his servants, and for good measure, burns down the whole city. (All the while, the fatted calf is sitting on the grill, and the wine is breathing, waiting to be poured) *Again, what a strange wedding celebration!*

Still the king decides to give it one more try. He tells his slaves,

*Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.*<sup>1</sup>

I wouldn't be surprised if the slaves were little bit more cautious this time, yet they go ahead and carry out the king's order and more. We are told:

*...they gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*<sup>2</sup>

So much does the king want to have this celebration, that with total lack of discernment he has his servants invite complete strangers, and not just that—both the **good** and the **bad**. Can you imagine this will end well? It seems like inviting your own wedding crashers! *This wedding just gets stranger and stranger!*

But now the party is underway. The food is being eaten, the wine is being drunk, and music and dancing and all the hokey wedding traditions are in full swing. It is finally starting to feel like a normal wedding. But just when we think all is well, the king comes upon a situation that disturbs him.

*'Friend (he says cynically to one of his guests), how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And [the man] was speechless.*<sup>3</sup>

So the king has this guest tied up, and thrown into the darkness, a place (we are told) where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." In other words - not that great of a place to be. Just when you think we would get a semi-happy ending to this story. Things get bizarre again. Who knew you had to have special wedding attire to be acceptable to this king? *So the wedding ends as it begins - strange, weird, odd, almost incomprehensible.*

Many people have studied this passage. Centuries of reflection can be found on this story. Christians have found a variety of meanings in this parable though the years. So let me give you a version of one interpretation, accepted as definitive by many. This great benefit of this interpretation it that it seems to make sense of all the various parts of this odd story. This interpretation is an *allegorical* interpretation, where every element and character of the story represents something else.

Here is a little chart that might help:

king = **God**  
son = **Jesus**  
marriage feast = **the great marriage feast of the Lamb at the end of time**  
slaves = **prophets & messengers of God**  
those invited = **Israel**  
violence = **Israel's rejection of prophets**  
destroyed city = **falls of Jerusalem in A.D. 70**  
gathering of good and bad = **evangelistic mission of church**  
wedding hall = **church**  
wedding garment = **Christian life**<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:9, *NRSV*.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:10, *NRSV*.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:12, *NRSV*.

Though this parable comes from Jesus, it is written down by Matthew, and addressed to his particular church, a group that is primarily Jewish Christians, a people who are experiencing tensions with their own Jewish brothers and sisters in 1st Century Palestine.

In this interpretation, the first part of the parable is easy - the **king** is God and the **son** is Jesus. The **marriage feast** is a way of referring to that great celebration that comes when the faithful are united with God at the end of time. Jesus himself says earlier in this gospel,

*I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,<sup>5</sup>*

The **slaves** are those who bring God's message to the people, most likely the Jewish prophets who spoke God's word to the nation, challenging them in the present and warning them about the future.

Next, there are those who got the initial **invitation**. The early church, especially Matthew's profoundly Jewish/Christian church, would have known well the story that the Jewish people were invited to follow this Messiah Jesus but had rejected him, had refused the invitation.

*One very important aside here. This part of the story has been used over many centuries to promote anti-semitism and to show the Jewish community somehow as uniquely rejecting Christ. Let me be clear—this interpretation is an evil, destructive, and tragic misuse of this story.*

Back in the parable, the **violence** done to the slaves would have called to mind how prophets were rejected and killed by their own people. Matthew's hearers would also have been thinking about the persecution and martyrdom of Christian missionaries. They could reflect on the tense nature of things between their fledgling church and the Jewish establishment of that day.

The **destroyed city** is thought of as God's judgement on people who push God away, and early Christians would have recalled the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The gathering of everyone and anyone, **the good and the bad**, points to those beyond the Jewish community, to the Gentiles and to those who don't fit the "expected behavior" of what good "churchgoing" folks in those day might have looked like.

The **wedding hall** is what it looks like when all these folks are together—a kind of joyful chaos that is the church.

Finally, the guest without the **proper garment** is the person who readily accepts God's invitation, but does not really live the kind of life to which Christians are called. Here is a person who does not really show the fruits to the Spirit.

*To summarize this view in a simple way: God invites a particular people into God's presence. The people reject God and God's messiah. The people are punished. God invites all people into God's presence. Many come and share in God's blessings. But some do not reflect that commitment in their lives. These are banished from that presence.*

This is a simple, but I think fair summary of the way some have approached this parable over time.

*But frankly, this view doesn't sit well with me.*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Matthew*, p. 246, Thomas Long.

<sup>5</sup> *Matthew* 8:11, *NRSV*.

You see, usually when we come to worship and hear a sermon on a Bible passage, what's on top of our hearts and minds are requests like this: "Tell me what it means." "Take away the mystery." "Help me understand."

*The problem is that Jesus' parables are not really designed that way.* They may reveal something to us about the kingdom of heaven in an intellectual way. They may answer our questions—but more often than not, they force us to wrestle with our own preconceptions about who God is and how the reign of God operates. I think all this is intentional on Jesus part.

Jesus does want to reveal some things to us, but he also wants us to probe deeper and he wants us to ask our own halting questions. He wants us to posit our own tentative answers, and he wants us to trust that he is with us in that process. Parables hold the possibility of many meanings, and we discover these meanings as we engage the story in an honest and open way.

So what I would like to do is share with you a few of the questions that came up when I read this text and offer a few of my own preliminary insights.

*There are really three questions for me.*

*First, why is there so much violence in this parable?* What is it about? What is Jesus getting at here with the violence directed at the king's slaves? Think about our own day. People get angry. They get out of hand. We take things to extremes. We rebel against authority. We resist things we do like want to do. While I do not understand the proportion of violence depicted here, I do understand its source. We see it all around us. I see it in myself.

In the same way I can also understand (though I do not accept) the violence of a king. Leaders of nations regularly destroy and torture those they do not agree with. Those in charge frequently do battle with those who threaten them. Government armies to put down what they perceive as rebellions and sometimes take it to excess.

But what puzzles me most is—what does any of this violence have to do with the kingdom of God? Do people really resist God's reign that viciously? Do others (like this king) feel justified in reacting with violence in kind? (and eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth?)

There is a passage in this same gospel that gives us a small hint about this violence. In Matthew 11:12 Jesus says this:

*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.<sup>6</sup>*

Maybe this is with paying attention to.

But what about the violence of the king? This is where I part with the idea that the king represents God. In fact, we would do well to not always assume that the main character in any parable is automatically a symbol for God. As one person put it— "sometimes a king is just a king." Perhaps when Matthew wrote down Jesus' parable he was thinking of Herod or other evil rulers of the time.

You see, there is no justice in this parable. People kill those who bring a simple message of a wedding invitation. A king's army burns down a whole town as punishment for the few who chose not to come.

So what is all this saying? What am I seeing? If anything, I see connections to the extreme violence in which we live today. *The genocide and expulsion of people from Syria. The disproportionate violence and*

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:12, NRSV.

*incarceration done to a young black men because of the color of their skin. The hoarding of resources that is at the root of poverty worldwide.*

If I learn anything here - I am convinced that I myself am not so far from this violence. Though I claim to be shocked about it and look down upon it, this violence is in me too.

Now, if the first question that emerges for me is crushingly disappointing, the second one fills me with light and hope and a little bit of trepidation. The second question is about the final invitation. *Why did the king invite everyone? Does he really mean "every" everyone?*

Everyone is invited to this wedding. The good and the bad (that about covers everybody) The gentile and the Jew. The populist and the elite. The conservative and the progressive. The sinner and the saint. *Everyone is invited.*

In this same gospel, you might remember that Jesus tells a parable of wheat going among weeds.<sup>7</sup> Of sheep being judged along with goats.<sup>8</sup> Paul the apostle talked about barriers falling between Jews and Gentile, women and men, oppressed and oppressor. What is happening here that looks like radical inclusion. This invitation looks like the great feast predicted by the prophet Isaiah:

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples...<sup>9</sup>*

So what are we to make of this? Here's what I think: Something about God's kingdom does not like boundaries and exclusion. Something about God's kingdom does not like walls that keep neighbors out. Something about God's kingdom does not bow to the privilege of those who think they (or is it we?) are the good ones. Something about God's kingdom welcomes the refugee, the immigrant, the wanderer, the stranger, even the enemy. The good **and** the bad (however we might define them).

*If I learn anything here - I am convinced that I am far from offering the kind of generous invitation that characterizes the kingdom of God. I am still learning the nature of God's welcome and how I can reflect that in my own life.*

And then there is one final question, perhaps the most puzzling one of the whole parable. The final question is about that odd last part of the parable, a section that is really a parable on its own. *Is it really important to wear the right clothes?*

This part of the parable is so confusing, that when the Gospel of Luke records this same story from Jesus, he leaves this section out!<sup>10</sup>

Think about it, this parable takes us on an emotional roller coaster ride, from a generous invitation, to violent response, to radical welcome, and now to what seems like a petty concern about clothing. Folks get invited from just about everywhere, from all situations, and this host expects them to be wearing the right clothing?

Some scholars explain that though certain attire would have been expected for a wedding a host like this king would have been sure to provide it.<sup>11</sup> So, you could say then, this "friend" had no excuse. He came to the wedding but refused to wear the right clothing.

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 13:24-30, *NRSV*.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 25:31-46, *NRSV*.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 25:6, *NRSV*.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 14:15-24, *NRSV*.

<sup>11</sup> [http://wesley.nnu.edu/fileadmin/imported\\_site/biblical\\_studies/parables/Wa\\_Mt22\\_11-14.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/fileadmin/imported_site/biblical_studies/parables/Wa_Mt22_11-14.htm)

In early centuries, when Christians were baptized, they received a white robe, a baptismal garment as a sign of their new life in Christ.<sup>12</sup> You will notice our Ethiopian brothers and sisters wear these white robes even today. Paul the apostle picks up this same image:

*...for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*<sup>13</sup>

When we are “in Christ” something about our lives has changed. And we do well to look for that change in our lives.

Recently, I have found myself asking this question about myself in a very particular way. Like many of you, I have been distressed in the wake of our recent national election. I find myself questioning whether some of the directions we are taking in our country are a dramatic denial of the will of God for humanity. And so, most importantly, if this is so, how will I respond? I live a pretty safe, privileged existence. And I am grateful for all I have been given.

Yet I wonder if putting on Christ means I am called to engage my world, my neighborhood, my community in a different way, a new way, a more sacrificial way, a bolder way. Am I refusing to put in the garment that I was given when I came to this party?

I like the way Thomas Long puts it when talking about the man at the wedding party:

*Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? Where is his regard for generosity? The other guests humbly, quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive garments of worship and celebration, but there he is, bellying up to the punch bowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt.*<sup>14</sup>

Am I like this man? Could it be that though I have been invited, I’m just not ready to party? Am I speechless in the face of God’s call?

So again, this parable makes me ask the question of my own complicity in violence. This parable nudges me to wonder at the wide embrace of God’s invitation. This parable almost forces me to ask if I am really being transformed at all.

So, here is my encouragement to you. Take some time to let this parable work on you. Talk about it around your dinner table. Let it enter into your quiet time. Process it in your life groups. Pray about it in your spare moments. See where it connects with you, challenges you, bugs you, encourages you. Stay with it. Ask God to use it to teach you. Let it fill you with thoughts and feelings about the kingdom of God, Let it fill you with compassion for our world, Let it fill you with questions and affirmations about yourself. *Then do it again.*

May the God who creates us, redeems us and sustains us fill us with all grace and peace, now and forever. Amen.

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://incarnation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/A-Rite-of-Passage- Easter-Vigil -Aldan-Kavanagh.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Galatians 3:27, *NRSV*.

<sup>14</sup> *Matthew*, Thomas G. Long, p. 248.

## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What is the strangest thing you ever remember happening at a wedding?
2. Jim called this sermon “The Weirdest Wedding Ever.” Read Matthew 22:1-14. What are the weirdest things that happen in this story? What do you make of them?
3. Do people reject God’s kingdom like people rejected the king’s invitation? Why or why not?
4. Is God violent? Is God violent in the way the king was violent? Why do you think this? Do you think violence has anything to do with God’s reign? Why or why not?
5. What does a parable do? Is a parable designed to give us an exact picture of the reign of God or to challenge our notions of what the God’s kingdom is like?
6. Do you believe that everyone, both “the good and the bad,” are invited to share in the blessings of God’s kingdom? Why or why not? What does that say about God’s kingdom?
7. What do you think about the story of the guest not wearing the wedding garment? Is there a prerequisite for participating in this wedding banquet? Is there a something we must do to participate in the work of God’s kingdom? If not, then what does wearing this “garment” mean?
8. How might this story help us (or confuse us) as we struggle today with questions of violence, of inclusion, of discipleship?



#### Table to Table Question

#### A question for kids and adults to answer together

When God gives a party, who is invited?  
Why do you think some people don’t want anything to do with God?