

Faith's Fashion Statement
Matthew 22: 1 – 14
(preached October 22, 2023)

Jesus uses a lot of metaphors for the Kingdom of God. He compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed, a tiny seed that grows into a big tree (Matthew 13:31). He compares the Kingdom to a landowner who hires workers for his vineyard (Matthew 20: 1). And here, in our gospel passage for today, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a king who gives a wedding banquet for his son.

I think a wedding banquet is a wonderful image for the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom we find new life in a loving relationship with God. In the Kingdom, lives come together in mutual joy: our lives, and the life of the One who made us. Like a wedding, God's Kingdom is full of celebration, with plenty of good food and drink, laughter and dancing. Everybody is invited to this celebration. We can see why Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a wedding.

But this parable of the wedding banquet also packs a punch. Yes it's about God's generous welcome. But it's also about our response to God's welcome. What is a faithful response to God's welcome? Not long ago, the message of this parable hit me in a personal way as I got ready for a special family wedding: my son's wedding.

My son's wedding was in the northeastern part of our state, at a beautiful hotel by the water. I was living out here in western Massachusetts, almost three hours' drive away, so I traveled the day before the wedding to stay the night with a good friend. My friend lived about half an hour north of the wedding spot. When I arrived at my friend's house, I brought in my suitcase. I also took the dress I was going to wear to the wedding out of the car and hung it carefully in the guest room closet.

The wedding was at six o'clock the following day. Late in the afternoon that day, I pulled into the parking lot of the hotel. I was excited about the wedding. I was also feeling good because I had allowed plenty of time to change. I went to the back of the car to get my dress. But when I opened the hatch, no dress! Suddenly I realized that I had left it behind at my friend's house! Here I was, an hour before the wedding, without my dress, my carefully chosen dress. I was filled with panic. What could I do? This was a catastrophe.

I called my friend in great alarm. Fortunately, she was able to meet me halfway and deliver the dress. I made it back to the hotel just in time to put on the dress, run a comb through my hair, and hurry to the wedding, grateful that I had managed to avoid a fashion catastrophe.

The next day, I reflected on my narrow escape from that fashion catastrophe. Thinking about it, I realized that my son and his bride would have been happy to have me at the wedding, even if I had shown up in jeans and a T shirt. But I would have been

mortified to appear at the wedding wearing jeans and a T shirt. (Even if it was a nice T shirt.) I would have been mortified.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet a king gives for his son. It's a wonderful image. At first the parable sounds like a parable about God's extravagant welcome. At first, it seems to be about God's invitation to all, to a joyful feast where no one is turned away. The king, when the first guests refuse his invitation, is determined to give a generous welcome. So he has his servants go out to the streets and invite all kinds of people: good and bad. And the wedding hall is filled with guests. But the parable doesn't end there.

The king enters the banquet hall and looks over the scene. When he spots a man who isn't properly dressed, he says, "Friend, how dare you come in here looking like that!" The man is speechless. Then the king tells his servants – "Get him out of here!"

That's the punch packed in this parable. The invitation to the banquet is given to all, but it comes with an expectation. The expectation is that when guests accept the invitation, they'll arrive in the proper attire.

If you're having a little trouble with this parable today, you're not alone. I think a lot of us have trouble with the message of this parable. This parable can be hard to hear. We often hear about the grace of God that is freely offered to all, and in this wedding, the invitation is offered to all. But – here's the punch - not everybody gets to stay. That fellow – the one over there – the one who's not wearing the right clothes – he gets the bum's rush.

When I listened to this parable as a little girl, it seemed very unfair to me. It didn't seem right for a wedding guest to be kicked out just because of what he was wearing. Here he was, invited at the last minute, hustled by the king's servants into this elegant hall, with music and marvelous food and drink. When was he supposed to find the time to change? Why should this man be kicked out because he doesn't have the proper attire? And how come the other guests are wearing the right thing all of a sudden? Where did they get their outfits? None of them are well to do. It doesn't seem fair.

Over and over again, Jesus says the Kingdom is for all people: the poor, the weak, the outcast, because God loves all of us. God invites all of us. But this parable doesn't stop with God's gracious invitation. The parable moves on to what happens once we accept God's invitation. Once we accept, God asks something of us.

When we accept the invitation, God calls us to turn over a new leaf and change our lives. God does love us just the way we are, but, as a wise person once said, "God loves us just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way." God's Kingdom is like a wedding, but it's a wedding where we're expected to put on the right garments: the garments of faith. The garments of faith clothe us for actions of love and justice. Those garments clothe us for actions like healing diseases, binding up broken hearts, and setting captives free.

When we accept God's invitation to the Kingdom, we're called to make some changes in our lives. You know, when you think about it, that's not all that different from what happened in Jesus' ministry. Yes Jesus met people where they were, but he invited them to change. When the lame came to him, he didn't say, "You're fine just the way you are." He said, "Take up your bed and walk" (John 5:8). When the outcasts and women of ill repute came to him, he didn't say, "You're fine just the way you are." He met them where they were, but his love refused to let them stay as they were. Responding to his love, they changed their lives.

God's Kingdom is like a wedding, a wedding where the life of faith begins. When we show up at the wedding, God expects us to be dressed for the life of faith. God calls us to put on the garments of faith: garments that clothe us for acts of justice and love: healing diseases, binding up broken hearts, and setting captives free. The garments of faith are the right attire for the wedding that is life in the Kingdom. Because God loves us just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way.

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