

## “Invitations to the Wedding Banquet”

Matthew 22:1-14

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Once upon a time, Jesus told a parable. In his parable, he used an ordinary event, a wedding banquet, to explain a profound truth about the Kingdom of God. Those listening to Jesus’ story would have understood it was an allegory and known how to decode the details. In Jesus’ parable, the King is God, the son is Jesus and the marriage banquet is the great marriage feast of the Lamb of God at the end of time. Those invited to the banquet were the people of Israel, the slaves meant the prophets. The story’s violence and destruction of the city refers to Israel’s rejection of the prophets and the fall of Jerusalem. Going out to gather the good and the bad is the evangelistic mission of the church and the wedding hall symbolizes the church, filled with –you guessed it--the “good and the bad.”

I get hung up on the word “banquet” in this passage. When I hear “banquet” I immediately think of a rather formal, stiff event, something you *endure* while dressed in restrictive clothes and “*one hour shoes*”– meaning after one hour your feet hurt. A banquet is something I am *supposed* to go to. And the menu! Rubbery chicken, a medley of overcooked vegetables in a weak butter sauce, iceberg lettuce salad with two cherry tomatoes and three croutons sprinkled on top. A choice of either Ranch or Italian salad dressing . . . where is the good stuff—blue cheese dressing with chunks of blue cheese? Eight rolls and eight pats of butter per table of eight. A meal that feeds one’s stomach, not one’s soul. That is my image of a banquet. That kind of banquet image contradicts our life-giving, extravagantly generous God, does it not?

That kind of banquet is not what Jesus is talking about here. What he describes in his parable is much closer to our notion of “party.” A good party, a great party! The kind you cannot wait to have happen, not one you “have” to go to. The kind of party you hate to leave, one you talk about for years to come. I attended just such a party recently.

It was the party that took place after I officiated the wedding of Lisa Shearer’s niece Shelby & her fiancé Jordan. Their wedding party was soooo much fun! I took notes!

One thing that made it exceptionally fun was the intergenerational crowd on the dance floor; Baby Boomer friends of the Bride & Groom's parents, college aged friends of the couple -- some straight, some not --, young children, grandparents, even a baby in the crowd. I saw Cameron dancing with his Grandmother, Cassie dancing with her Dad.

The father of the Groom and five college guys danced together in a circle surrounding one guy as he danced alone in the center during several songs. Something about their manner made their circle look protective, as if they were forming a cushion around him so he could dance freely. . . . .

With dancing going on in the background, I witnessed Lisa Shearer, sad and tearful over Chris' upcoming deployment, being comforted. In the midst of celebrating, her two sisters took the time to listen to and care for her.

People from a variety of backgrounds were at the wedding party. Some members of the groom's family are Jewish. There we were -- Jews and Christians, Young and Old, Republicans and Democrats -- people from all walks of life gathered together because of our love for the Groom and his Bride. A Spirit of goodwill, one could even say a spirit of love, permeated the room. That kind of celebration resembles the wedding banquet Jesus speaks about. That is the party God intends -- a diverse throng of people gathered together in their common love for the Groom -- Jesus Christ. That kind of party demonstrates the church at its best; protectively encircling rather than shunning persons marginalized by society. A church that will take the time to comfort a Sister in the midst of celebrating---without missing a beat. A church that embraces people from all walks of life based solely on their love for Jesus Christ. A church filled with a spirit of love.

Jesus describes a wedding banquet in which everyone is welcome, so why is one guy thrown out for wearing the wrong clothes? Invited in off the street, it's not likely he would have had suitable clothes on hand. Keep in mind, this is not an ordinary story but a parable and things in parables stand for other things. The "wedding garment" or the "wedding robe" symbolizes the Christian life. Clothing metaphors are often used in scripture to explain how we are to live as Christians, for ex., "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" Colossians instructs us (3:12). "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed

yourselves with Christ” Galatians says (3:27). To “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”, as instructed in Romans 13, means to fully enter into the new way of life God created through Christ. Jesus says, “Come as you are” not “stay as you are once you follow.” The wedding garment, or in this case the lack of one, clues us in as to whose side this guy is on--similar to wearing your team’s colors to a sporting event.

This parable reminds us being a Christian should make a difference in who we are and how we live. People should know by our lives the type of party we attend. Do others even know how thankful we are to have received God’s invitation?

What if an envelope with the return address of Buckingham Palace had shown up in your mailbox last winter? How would you have felt about an invitation to Prince William and Kate Middleton’s wedding? Ecstatic, excited beyond belief, fearful someone would realize their mistake? After all, you and I are not Royalty. We are “commoners” and not even **British** commoners! How in the world would you and I ever get invited to a wedding banquet thrown for a Prince and his bride?

You and I actually have received invitations to a wedding party for a Prince, the Prince of Peace. We are last minute replacements for the original guest list – the people of Israel. That’s how Gentiles got invited to the party. Not only were we not on the “A” list, we were not on *any* list! But when others declined the invitation, it is “as if” God tacked up a huge “*Everyone Welcome*” sign and threw open the doors to the banquet. We should feel eternally grateful to the Host that we were even included rather than superior towards those who declined the invitation.

In regards to the invitation, do we do our best to “talk up this party?” What do we tell folks? Do they get the impression from us that the invitation is to a bland, restrictive banquet? A high school friend was fond of saying, “Don’t dance, don’t smoke, don’t chew---or go with those that do.” The surprise was how perplexed she was that none of her friends wanted to attend her youth group! What kind of invitations are we issuing to the Christian life? Do people get the idea this is a party no one should dare miss? Do they understand by looking at our lives that at this party, one is comforted, protected, well nourished for the challenges of life in a spirit of love while one laughs and celebrates and worships and dances the night away? Do they get that? What have we told them?

God's invitation reads: **Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.** Those of us already at the party need to talk it up. Amen.