

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Come Dressed—or Else”

By Wes Eades
Matthew 22:1-14
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Matthew 22:1-14 (New International Version)

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Last Sunday, Dr. Williams was able to take one of the very hard sayings of Jesus and put it in front of us in a way that was, I thought, confrontive, yet graceful. Whether we like it or not, Jesus said that if you want to be forgiven, you better tend to forgiving others. And Dan, I think I speak for most of us when I say, "Why don't you mind your own business and stop stepping on toes."

The text I'm preaching from today is another hard text. This is a bizarre and disturbing story. The King throws a party for his son. The servants go to invite all the proper guests. We're told these supposedly proper guests decline the invitation because they've got such pressing things to take care of – like mowing the lawn or counting the week's business receipts. If that's not strange enough, we're also told that some of the servants are beaten and killed. Now I want to be very clear about something, if I invite you to a party and you don't want to come, no one is going to die over it. I don't care how boorish you're being about it; no one will die over it.

The servants are told to go back out... to go into the rough neighborhoods and invite whomever they can find. That must have been an interesting moment. Some of them had lost their lives passing out invitations in Castle Heights and now the ones who made it back are being sent to the projects.

Evidently no one dies in the second go 'round, because we're told that the banquet hall is packed with more Walmarters than a first Monday in Canton. All these good, down-to-earth folks are walking around like Cinderella at the ball.

And, as Dr. Williams noted last week, **THIS** is where the story needs to end. Even the theologically densest among us can see that this is a parable about Jesus... about how God sent Jesus to invite us to the party... the snobs didn't get it, but the common folk do. And, of course, you and me... we're the common

folk... not the snobs... right? So, this is where the story needs to end. We've got your basic feel-good moment, and then we get this:

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. (Imagine that) "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

I think most of us would say, "That's not fair." Even if the guy getting tossed was Al Joseph, we'd still think, "That's not fair." The King comes off as a major psycho. But, let's be honest... God comes off as a major psycho to a lot of people... Still, what are we to make of this? The guy shows up in response to an emergency invitation and then is tossed for improper dress.

Matthew's Gospel, as we have it now, was getting major airplay toward the end of the first century, **after** the destruction of the temple. Why should we care about that? We should care because, prior to the Temple's destruction, these pesky Christians were still able to exist within the general framework of Judaism. However, as is often the case when some great symbol is lost, the destruction of the Temple unleashed a great power struggle among groups with competing agendas.

This seems to be one of the abiding characteristics of "small self" human nature that emerges when we start forming herds. Social psychologists have long observed that when we start binding together into groups, there are three questions that have to be answered, and they generally have to be answered in the right order.

- Question one: Who's in and who's out?
- Question two: Who gets to make the rules?
- Question three: Who gets the Love?

All you have to do is look at young children playing together to see these dynamics at work.

- **Who's in and who's out?** Some children will be in the middle of the game while others will be pushed to the sidelines. How does that happen?
- **Who gets to make the rules?** Some children will end up with the power to decide whether the game will be tag or hide-and-seek, while others' attempts to exercise influence will be ignored. How does that happen?
- **Who gets the Love?** If that group of children sticks together over time, it will become evident that some of them will simply garner more love and affection from the group than others. Again, how does that happen?

There are plenty of theories about why this happens, but there's no question that it does. And whenever there is some sort of disruption in the group – a new child enters the mix, or a favorite toy the group uses

for play gets lost or broken – the group either reconstitutes itself by working through the three core questions again, or the group falls apart altogether.

Like I said, all you have to do is watch a classroom of children over the course of a school year to see these dynamics play out, but it's not just children who act out these great psychological dramas. You'll see them at play everywhere adults gather. At work, at play, and... at church.

Most scholars agree that Matthew is writing to Jewish Christians. As such he is writing to a group that is teetering on the edge of chaos because they've lost their defining symbol, the Temple, and they are coming under increasing threat. Much of what he includes in his Gospel argues that now is the time to redefine who is in and who is out. And so he includes a number of stories that attempt to define who the real God-followers are. This story, using the apocalyptic image of the banquet, goes right to the heart of the who's in and who's out question. God is throwing a banquet. Everyone is invited. The idiots who are too dense to understand the significance of this banquet... well... they're out, and deservedly so. Matthew's audience would have heard him saying, "The Temple leaders had their chance to bring in God's Kingdom, but they messed things up, so let's throw the bums out!" (By the way, you can replace the phrase "Temple Leader" with either Republican or Democrat, depending on your preference, and come up with an equally dramatic charge.)

But the Gospel writer also includes, almost out of left field, this other disturbing warning. ***Be careful. Some are going to think they are on the inside, only to get bounced out on their keesters.***

Okay... this is where I'm supposed to say something like, "And isn't this rather like DaySpring?"

Well... yes... in fact it is. Almost exactly a year ago our world shifted because a person who had this unique ability to inject God's binding glue into this place went away. And with that change has come all the expected anxieties that go with such transitions. We've been doing our dance with the three core questions - especially the first two. Who's really "in" at DaySpring? Who gets the power to decide where we'll head next?

With regards to the first question, the in/out question - it seems to me that we've done pretty good with that. Look at how packed this place is. And we are not a group that is in lock step in any way that I can think of. Pick any theological, social, or political issue, and you're going to find people in this room on opposite sides. We like to think that in order to be IN at DaySpring, all you have to do is show up with a desire to worship with an open heart and mind. You don't even have to sign up on the chart, for pity's sake (although it was revealed to Doyle in a recent vision that you get extra stars in your crown for doing so...)

That second question has been harder, hasn't it?

Who gets to have power?

How are decisions made?

Who gets to pick the decision makers?

Who gets to pick the next pastor?

I've been in and out of so many conversations where these concerns have been raised.

Are my opinions going to be heard?

Can I trust that those who've been given power are really listening to everyone?

Can I trust those who seem to have trouble trusting?

And I **know** this is where this story has something to say to me.

God is throwing an amazing party, and we're all invited. Yet, for all of God's generous grace, I still have the power to mess things up for myself by dressing with an unprepared heart.

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We are getting close to receiving a fresh invitation to the next... installment... of the banquet. And when that invitation is officially delivered, you and I... we're going to have some choices....

How to dress...

What should I wear?

Tell me... does my heart look open in this?

Amen

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