

## A Sermon of DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Both Bad and Good*

Matthew 22.1-14

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The gospel reading takes us to this moment of high tension between Jesus and a group of religious leaders. Jesus tells a parable of a wedding feast, and it's a doozy, as they say. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, tensions are high, the religious leaders are really pressing in on him. So Jesus begins to tell a story about the kingdom of heaven that involves a king throwing a wedding feast for his son who is getting married. And oh it sounds so nice to begin with.

A feast is one of the great biblical images of life with God. Psalm 23 anticipates a day when a table is set before me, and my cup overflows. Song of Solomon pictures a banqueting table where God's banner of love flies high. When the prodigal son returns home, what does the father do but throw a party. Feasting is the expression of joy and celebration with loved ones. You can eat alone, but to feast you have to be with others. Every meal we take, especially the eucharist, is imagined theologically as anticipation of the heavenly feast. So here we have in this story a feast with God.

And not just a feast, but the highest form of feasting, a wedding feast. Again, another major biblical theme. Our relationship with God isn't just the relationship of a dutiful citizen to a king, or a pupil to a teacher, but of those in a covenant of devotion, a marriage. In the New Testament, the church aren't just attenders to a wedding, but also the bride to the bridegroom. Sometimes the bridegroom is God; sometimes the bridegroom is Christ. Sometimes we are invited to be guests at the wedding, and sometimes we are the bride. The wedding feast metaphor works in every kind of way. In every way, a wedding feast is the highest, holiest, most exalted form of celebration, and you are both included and right in the heart of it.

So, the story goes, the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast of love for the son and all who are invited to take part. That's a good story, but like many stories, this one goes wrong, so very wrong. I suppose by this point in the gospel we should expect a good story to go wrong. By this point in the gospel, we know enough to know that the story of Jesus and the world will not be a simple story of God's love offered, willingly received, celebrated, and shared. The cross is inevitable by now, and, like yesterday's eclipse, its shadow already lies across the faces of the religious leaders who reject him and all their lives.

In the wedding story Jesus spins, the king sends word to everyone who is invited, "It's ready, come on." But no one comes. So he sends word again, "Y'all come on. Everything is ready for you. The table is ready. I've killed the fatted calves. The wine overflows, and the band is warmed up. You don't want to miss this. It's the party of the millennium."

Still, no one comes. A happy story turns into a sad story. The indifference of the invited guests is appalling. They just keep going about their daily lives. It's indifference or distraction by demands of the day, or anxiety about work that must be done and responsibilities fulfilled. A celebration is on, a love feast, but pressures of daily life are just too much to get away from to take time to feast. It's not hard to relate to that.

Other invited guests are not just indifferent but for some reason, violently reject the invitation. Taking the servants of the king, abusing them, and even killing them. The story goes from happiness in celebration, to sadness from rejection to angry retribution when the king strikes back.

As a spiritual story, this parable hits home: when we are indifferent to God or even worse when we reject everything good God has to offer, eventually we begin to experience God as an adversary or at least an annoyance. God has not changed, but we have, and we suffer when we push God away and alienate ourselves from the divine. Before any spiritual union can possibly take place, the stubborn, resisting part of the self within each of us needs to be brought low and to fall away. All of us who, at some point, have made a mess of our lives, or have become cynical or self-centered or defiant, know what that's like. Sometimes the ego must be crucified before the soul can be reborn.<sup>1</sup>

Back to the parable where still, the king doesn't want the hall to be empty because he wants to honor the son and party like it's '99. Servants are sent again out into the streets, into all the alleys. They're there to bring in everyone in, all people who can be found. And so they came, both bad and good. It seems significant that Jesus includes that. I can imagine him saying it slowly, for dramatic affect to religious leaders who though stung by this story see themselves as good, "The servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both . . . bad . . . and . . . good. And *they* came. The wedding hall was filled with guests."

Everyone is invited. Everyone is welcome. At the wedding feast of the son, the palace doors are now thrown wide open to all people. The only price for admission is that you want to come, and you want to be there and accept the invitation. It is a matter of opening the doors of our hearts and our communities to everyone because the Gospel is not reserved for a select few. It is also a matter of opening our full selves because the Gospel is not reserved for just the good parts of ourselves, but for our whole selves. We are all invited in, and we are all invited all the way in. Even those on the margins, even those parts within us that cause great shame and regret, all is considered by God to be worthy of his love, the good and the bad. He prepares the banquet for everyone: the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the intelligent and the uneducated, the acceptable and the inadequate. The chief priest and the thief on the cross, the woman caught in adultery and the tax collector, the man born blind and the blind and lame who he healed at the temple. Go get them all!

It's always good to be reminded: before the church is anything, any kind of institution or organization or buildings or budgets or programs, it is a servant sent out to the world with the simple invitation, "Come on. You're invited." Before the church is anything else it's a marching band of misfits to the lavish table of the Lord.

Just when it seems like we've come to the fullness of the meaning of the story—rejection of religious leaders who do not come to Christ's invitation in exchange for open invitation to all. Just when we're about to get really comfortable, or uncomfortable as it may be, with the point

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<sup>1</sup> adapted from <https://preachingforgodsworld.org/20th-sunday-after-pentecost-2/>

of the parable being simply God's inclusive love for all people, the story complicates modern sensibilities when the king sees a man who has no wedding garment and tosses him out.

Commentators over the centuries have offered varied interpretations of what the wedding garment is supposed to represent and what its absence indicates for this one man who isn't wearing one. It's kind of a puzzle what that meant in their culture, maybe there was a wedding garment passed out at the door for major wedding feasts like this. For sure the metaphor of being clothed in Christ is threaded all through the New Testament. It's a picture taken together of the change that comes to a person whose life is Christ's. We put on Christ, and we are changed.

In Romans 13, we put on Christ and therefore make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. In Ephesians 4, we put off the old self, our deceit from our former manner of life, and put on the new self, clothed in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. In Colossians 3, we put off our old self with its practices and put on the new self, renewed in the image of our creator in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, barbarian, slave, or free, but Christ is all in all. This image runs through all the New Testament and maybe it comes to its completion in Revelation 7, where a great multitude robed in white are those who have come through great suffering and now are before the throne of God, where God wipes away every tear from their eyes.

For Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the wedding garment in the parable obviously represented love because it was a wedding and because of what he believed about the nature and character of God. He writes, "What must we understand by the wedding garment but love? That person enters the marriage feast, but without wearing a wedding garment. He may have faith, but he does not have love. Love is the wedding garment because this is what our Creator himself possessed when he came to the marriage feast to join the church to himself." But then, what is this love?

The garment, which God offers us unceasingly, is the free gift of his love, to be welcomed with astonishment and joy every day: "Thank you, Lord, for having given me this gift". It is a gift that can only be received with openness because God's love changes those who receive it. God loves working in those whose hearts are open to conversion, redemption, transformation. We put off our old self; we put on the new. Just as I am without one plea? Sure. But leave me as I am? Please God, no. Take, O Take me as I am? Yes, Lord. But also, summon out what I shall be and live in me.

What does that look like? Well, it's messy in every life open to God's transforming ministry in their lives. It's always messy, but it's also kind of wonderful, too.

Recently I was part of a worship service a long way from here. I had no responsibilities in the room, so walked in, and found a seat in the far back corner of the far back row. (I feel you.) As I walked the room, I realized I didn't know hardly anyone in the room. I slid to the back corner of the back row and waited for the service to begin. And then realized as I walked in, I had been handed an order of service and a pink sheet of paper. Uh-oh. Maybe that was the wedding garment in our parable, representing our lives or something. I didn't know. I just knew something creative was afoot. During the service, a leader came forward to tell us that we

would now all take part in origami prayer. Origami, you know, where you take a regular-looking sheet of paper and by folding it in all kinds of ways, it turns into a swan or whatever. Now, I figure some part of this congregation would love it if we did that on a Sunday morning. And another part would loathe it. And so, whoever you are, look under your chairs.... Totally kidding. Nothing under your chairs but cobwebs.

I confess to you that I was solidly in the loathe camp, but also (because I'm virtuous) I decided I wouldn't cross my arms and roll my eyes at this. I would will myself to have a good attitude. I'm not a hater. I'm gonna be a good team player on the back row with my sheet of pink paper. So the task explained somehow to be an act of prayer, was to write on this sheet some people you're praying for. Ok, that's easy enough. And then take the upper left corner and fold it down till it meets the lower right corner. Then make a seam halfway down the center line, turn it over, take the right 1/3, and fold it over to touch ... I don't know, but about that time, someone came in late, and I had to stand to let them scoot by to an open seat. Which was no problem, except that I missed a step. And in origami, if you miss a step, it's over. I tried to catch up, I really did. We were supposed to end up with a heart. Isn't that sweet? We were supposed to be able to turn this sheet of paper into a pink heart that we would all hold up as our prayer.

Mine was definitely not a heart. It looked more like a kidney. If the sufficiency of our prayers or our righteousness of our hearts was judged by our ability to publicly render a perfect presentation in the community of the faithful, I was thrown out. And I admit, I was more than a little ashamed of this failure staring back at me, in my hands mocking me.

As it appeared, I wasn't alone. Few it turned out had produced something they could be proud of. Now, I mean there were a couple of preachers' pets in the first few rows inducted in the Origami Hall of Fame. But most people that I could see, their hearts were a mess, some broken, some ripped, some crumpled, some held forward with some sheepishness and others with shame. Everyone seems to have tried.

I don't think this was the intention for this "lituri-gami" moment. We were supposed to all be able to show forth pretty little identically shaped representations of our spirituality, perfectly rounded and folded. I guess that would have been nice. Instead, what happened was that most of us demonstrated a cartoonish inability to get that right, but it seemed to me in the process, we shared something better.

The leader looked out at this colossal creative mess and just started laughing. And then we all did. Because whatever happened with the papers, even more than the papers, it seemed in some small way—and maybe I'm making this more of what it should be made—but it seemed we were being folded into something that changes us. I still at that moment didn't know the people in that room, but I had the idea these people were all right. Some were good, some were bad. But somehow, the people in the room were going to be alright. As strange as that may sound if you've not experienced it, that seemed something like a parable of the gospel.

Amen.