

I

One of the best parts of my calling as a pastor is leading wedding services. Over the course of my career, I've led weddings in beautiful churches, and in backyards and in ballrooms and barns and on beaches and mountaintops. One thing I've noticed is that regardless of the setting or circumstances, at a wedding, people put more time and thought into the clothes they wear than for any other occasion. And sometimes, despite our best efforts, wedding wardrobe malfunctions happen. Even as the officiant, I myself once was the victim of an unfortunate zipper incident.

II

But there is a universal truth about weddings, I think, that applies not just to our culture, but in every culture around the world and throughout human history. Weddings are significant social events where people make meaning together, and part of the way in which we mark those occasions is by the clothes that we choose to wear. And all of that makes this story before us today, in which Jesus teaches his disciples a parable about a certain wedding banquet and a fashion faux pas, all the more troubling.

III

If you've been worshiping with us this winter, you know that we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel according to Matthew. Between where we left off last week and

where we pick up today, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem to great fanfare, with crowds of people waving branches and shouting, "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" We'll circle back and read that story in a few weeks on Palm Sunday, but for now, as we come to today's story, it's now the final week of Jesus' earthly life. He and the disciples have arrived in Jerusalem, and tensions with the authorities and the powers that be continue to ramp up. As Jesus teaches ever more potent parables about final judgment, the storm begins to gather.

So listen now for a Word from God from Matthew 22:1-14.

*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 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." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main*

*streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” 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.*

*‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. 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.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

What is this hot mess of a parable? A king gives a wedding banquet for his son. It should be the social event of the year, if not the century. It’s not just any wedding. It’s a *royal* wedding. The guest list should be a who’s who of high society. Weddings are social events where we make meaning together. So if you receive an invitation to a royal wedding, even if you don’t particularly like the king, you go anyway, because it’s such a high honor to be on the guest list for a royal wedding.

But this is a strange parable from start to finish. The invited guests don’t come. What are they thinking? How could they refuse such an invitation? But the king doubles down. He resends

the invitation, and this time he includes some enticing details about the menu.

But the response of the invited guests is even more astounding, if not downright appalling. Some make light of it and ignore the invitation again, and some make excuses about being too busy with work. You don’t have to be Emily Post to know that they’re not using good manners.

And then there’s this other bunch, who, instead of ignoring the invitation or making a lame excuse, they seize the poor messengers and kill them. We have all received an invitation to an event that we did not wish to attend. But I know no one who has responded to an invitation by murdering a postal worker. And so the enraged king sends his troops to destroy the murders and to burn their city to the ground.

And then the king sends messengers again, this time with instructions to go into the streets and invite everyone they come across, both good and bad, so that the banquet hall will be filled with guests.

But just when we thought the parable couldn’t get any stranger, the king comes into the hall and notices that a guest is not wearing a wedding robe. The king asks why the guest is not wearing a wedding robe, and when he has no answer, the king has security throw him out into the outer darkness, where, we’re told ominously, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And then to tie it all off, Jesus finishes with this cryptic phrase – For many are called, but few are chosen.

As you might imagine, this parable has frustrated and puzzled interpreters for years. Several bible scholars have referred to it as “The ugly parable,” and it’s easy to see why – it is ugly.

But there are a few things worth our consideration that might be helpful as we struggle to make sense of it. Some interpreters have suggested that this parable was meant to be read as an allegory. They point out that the first readers of Matthew’s gospel were likely first-century Jews who had been expelled from their synagogues and faith communities due to their insistence that Jesus was the Messiah. And so they suggest that in this reading, the king is God, who has prepared a wedding banquet for his Son, Jesus, and the first people on the guest list were the ancient Israelites.

But they refused to come, and so God sent the prophets to invite them again, but they seized the prophets and murdered them, and so God responded to their murderous ways by allowing Babylon to invade and destroy ancient Israel about 600 years before the birth of Christ.

And then God expanded the guest list, inviting both good and bad, or, in the case of Matthew’s first-century community, both Jew and Gentile, so that the wedding hall will be filled with guests.

It’s a lot of inside baseball, to be sure, and to arrive at that allegorical interpretation of this parable, you have to know something about the issues that were going on in Matthew’s first century community. But it seems like it doesn’t really have much to do with you and me in 21-st century America.

That is, until we come to the guest who did not put on a wedding robe.

Before we get to him and his fashion choices, or lack thereof, there’s something that is helpful to know about ancient royal wedding practices.

Weddings, as we’ve said, are social events where we make meaning together, and one of the ways in which we make meaning is through our clothing choices.

As I understand it, at ancient royal weddings, the host provided every guest with a wedding robe – an outer garment to wear during the wedding feast. The idea, as I understand it, was to ensure that regardless of status or station in life, regardless of age or gender or body size and shape, everyone knew they belonged. In those days, most people were poor and had only one set of clothes, but the host provided a wedding robe so that no one would feel ashamed or unable to come because they had nothing to wear.

At ancient royal weddings, the host took care of everything for the guests, and the only thing the guests

were expected to do was to put on the robe and enjoy the feast.

But in the parable, one guest was not wearing a wedding robe. And when the king entered the banquet hall, the guest who had accepted the king's invitation but failed to don the robe offered to him stood out. And when the king asked him to explain himself, and he had no answer, the king ordered him removed from the feast.

#### IV

My friend, you have received an invitation to the royal wedding feast, not because of your social connections or your net worth or anything you've said or not said or done or not done. You have received an invitation not because you're good or bad, but simply because the king desires more than anything that you would join the royal party. The king's desire, after all, is that the wedding hall would be filled with guests.

You have been invited, my friend, and the host has taken care of every detail. You don't even need to worry about what to wear, because the wedding robe has been provided for you.

At a wedding, we think more carefully about the clothes we will wear than for any other occasion. And one of the most frequently requested Scriptures for a wedding service a passage about clothing from the Letter to the Colossians, which reads, in part,

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility,*

*meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

My friend, you are God's chosen one. You are holy and beloved, simply the king has declared it to be so. That's why they call it grace.

#### V

So the question is, how will we respond to that grace? How will we live differently today in response to what God did for us thousands of years ago in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Or, to put it another way, what clothes will we wear, not just to the wedding banquet, but to the classroom, and to the office, and to the grocery store, and to the ballfield, and to all the places where we live and move and have our being?

The truth, friends, is whether we like it or not, the clothes we choose to wear say something about us. They communicate to others volumes about who we think we are, and what we think of others.

We have been invited to the royal wedding banquet. But what shall we wear?

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

Thanks be to God. Amen.