

I

In my line of work, I go to a lot of weddings. And over my years in ministry, I've led weddings in all kinds of settings. I've led weddings in beautiful sanctuaries like this one. I've led weddings in hotel ballrooms and on rooftop terraces. I've led weddings on a beach and on a mountainside and in a barn and in a backyard.

II

And one thing that seems to be universally true about a wedding, whether the wedding takes place with hundreds of guests in pews or just a few folks on folding chairs, people are more thoughtful about their clothing choices for a wedding than they are for any other event.

And it's not just the bride and groom or the wedding party or their parents who select their clothes carefully. To be invited to a wedding is to be invited to participate in one of the most significant days in someone's life, so all of us know intuitively to put a little more thought into what we will wear to such an event.

And just about all of us have stories about a clothing faux pas at a wedding. Even I myself, as the officiant, have been the victim of a wardrobe malfunction, desperately seek out a safety pin or some needle and thread ten minutes before the wedding was to begin.

When we're invited to a wedding, we choose our clothes more carefully

than we do for any other event. And as we'll see in our text from Matthew's gospel, that is true across all boundaries of time and culture.

III

Our text for today comes to us from the 22nd chapter of the gospel according to Matthew. It's the last week of Jesus' life on earth, as he and his disciples have entered the city of Jerusalem, greeted by children waving palm branches and shouts of Hosanna! Jesus has entered the Temple, the very center of the people's religious and political identity, and he has driven out the money changers and caused a ruckus. Jesus has been preaching and teaching in the Temple using parables – short stories that use common object lessons to illustrate a larger point, and the Pharisees and chief priests want to have Jesus arrested, but they're afraid of the crowds that Jesus keeps drawing to him. The conflict that has been simmering between Jesus and all of the different power factions in Jerusalem is about to boil over.

Nevertheless, Jesus keeps on preaching and teaching. And in our text for this morning, Jesus tells a parable about a wedding. So I invite you to listen now for a Word from God from Matthew 22:1-14.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet,

but they would not come. 4 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." 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." 10 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.

11 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. 13 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." 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

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

Earlier this summer, one of our elders led a bible study on parables and the Wizard of Oz. In the story of the Wizard of Oz, a Kansas girl named

Dorothy is knocked unconscious in a storm, and when she comes to, she discovers that she's not in Kansas anymore. Everything around her is both familiar and also strangely odd at the same time. And this feeling of everything looking both familiar and strange at the same time is described as being "Over the Rainbow."

And so in the bible study this summer, our teacher would begin reading one of Jesus' parables and invite us to raise our hands when we believed the parable had taken us "over the rainbow" – when the ordinary things in the story began to seem odd and out of place.

And so listen again to the beginning of this parable that Jesus teaches. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet to his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Right away, we've traveled over the rainbow. This is not just any wedding banquet. This party is being hosted by the king! This should be the social event of the decade, if not the century! And yet strangely, the invited guests will not come. They don't RSVP. They don't express their regrets. They just ignore the invitation, or as the kids would say, they ghost the king.

Any of us would have our feelings hurt, but again, the king sends more invitations, even going so far as to announce the menu. Again, the

invitation has come from the king himself, and there won't be a finer meal to be had in all the land. All that's being asked of the guests is to come and celebrate and enjoy.

But the parable continues to move over the rainbow. Some of the invited guests make light of the invitation. Others make excuses and go off to their farm and their business. And then the parable really goes over the rainbow. Other invited guests, rather than accepting the invitation or sending their regrets, take the messengers bearing the invitation and seize them and mistreat them, and then kill them. And the king responds in kind, declaring that those who were invited to the wedding banquet but responded with such utter disdain were not worthy of the invitation in the first place.

Then the king sends out invitations to whosoever would come, instructing his messengers to invite everyone they can find. And they do just that, and the banquet hall is filled with all kinds of people, both good and bad. But they all have one thing in common – they have been invited by the king to the event of the century, and so they put on their wedding robes and they come from north and south and east and west and sit down together at the table, good and bad, together.

And then the king enters the hall, and he notices one guest who is not wearing a wedding robe. And among all those guests, both good and bad, who

have responded to the king's invitation with joy, he sticks out.

He sticks out, not just because of what he's wearing on the outside, but because of what his clothing choices for the wedding reveal about how he feels about the king's invitation on the inside. He's been invited to come, not because of who he is, or because he's got money or social connections, but simply because of the king's generosity and welcome. But he shows no obvious joy gratitude for the invitation. He treats the invitation like an inconvenience or an obligation, rather than a gift of grace and generosity.

And so the king has him removed from the banquet, not because of what he was wearing, but because of what his clothing choices revealed about the orientation of his heart.

Remember, parables are stories that use common events to illustrate a larger truth. They're meant to provoke us, to make us think hard, to take us over the rainbow, so to speak, and this one certainly fits that bill. It's one that has flummoxed and challenged serious students of the bible for centuries, but it's worth considering seriously as we continue our conversations about gratitude, and gratitude's enemies.

IV

For us, as people of faith, gratitude is about more than just good manners, more than recognizing that we're in someone else's debt. Theologically understood, gratitude means that we recognize that everything

we have, everything we are, everything we will be, is a gift from God who is exceedingly, extravagantly generous.

Every time we look at the cross we are reminded of the height and breadth and width and depth of God's love for us. For us, gratitude is the key to the kind of peace that Jesus promised his disciples on the night of his arrest and betrayal, a kind of peace that passes all understanding.

And so for the rest of this month, we're going to be talking about gratitude, as well as some of the habits and practices that move us away from gratitude – what we're calling gratitude's enemies.

We've already named the enemies of nostalgia and worry. Today, we're naming another enemy of gratitude, the enemy of entitlement.

Years ago, I listened as a preacher gave a personal testimony about some things he and his wife had been through.

He described how before he answered God's call to ministry, he had a good job that a generous salary, and that salary enabled him to provide a very comfortable lifestyle for his wife and children.

When he answered God's call to ministry, he said he and his wife went in with no illusions about the change in lifestyle it would likely entail. And it did. They never missed a meal, they never were in danger of becoming unhoused, but their lifestyle changed fairly dramatically.

And about that time, the Great Recession hit. And again, they never missed a meal, they had every basic necessity met, but things got tight financially, far more tight than they'd ever experienced in their marriage to that date.

And the pastor shared that he began to be discouraged. His fuse began to grow short. Things that used to roll off of him without a second thought he began to stew over while he lay in bed at night.

And one night, as he was praying, he was taking all of these burdens before God. He was sharing with God about how hard ministry can be. He reminded God that he had been willing to give up his lucrative career to follow God's call. He reminded God of how hard he'd been working. And as he poured all of this out before God's throne, he was becoming more and more frustrated, his frustration beginning to boil over into anger, and he said these words came out of his mouth before God.

God, I've sacrificed so much. I've given up a career and I've followed you across the country and I've been obedient to your Word, but this is just too hard. You haven't given me what I deserve!

And no sooner had those words come out of his mouth did he become aware of the presence of God. And he heard the voice of God say to him, "My child, whom I love and adore, all that I have is yours. There's nothing I wouldn't give for you. So take another look at that

cross, and then let's talk about what I've given for you versus what you deserve."

When we practice the habits of gratitude, our hearts and minds are naturally oriented toward the triune God. When we practice the habits of gratitude, when we remember that all that we have, all that we are, and all that we will be, is a gift from God to be enjoyed, then we begin to find the peace that passes all understanding.

But when we allow entitlement to set in, when we begin to take for granted the gracious and extravagant mercy of God, when we forget who and Whose we are, our hearts and minds begin to be oriented toward the unholy trinity: me, myself, and I.

My friend, there is nothing in the world wrong with working hard and being proud of your accomplishments. There is nothing in the world wrong with enjoying the fruits of your labors. Don't let a sense of entitlement trick you into believing that all that you've accomplished, that all that you've built in your life, is solely by the sweat of your brow and nothing more. None of us accomplish anything in life apart from the blessings and gifts of God. The very air that's in your lungs right now, the very blood that is pumping through your heart, is there not by your own strength or intellect or power, but only by God's grace and mercy and providence.

And so you are loved and cherished by God, you are invited to the great feast, not because of anything you've done, not because of who you

know, not because you're righteous or a scoundrel, but simply because of the generosity and mercy of the king.

So come to the feast. Not because you are worthy, but because you are hungry. Come to the party, not because you are righteous, but because you are thirsty. Come not because you must, but because you may. Come not because you have received instructions, but because you have received an invitation from none other than the king of kings.

V

Friends, let us never take the invitation for granted. Let us choose carefully what we will wear to the feast, for what we choose to wear often reveals much about how we feel about our host and the invitation we have received. So let us take off and put away enmity and bitterness and jealousy and wrath.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, let us clothe ourselves with compassion. Let us clothe ourselves with kindness. Let us clothe ourselves with humility and meekness and patience. Above all, let us clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, to which indeed we were called in the one body.

Let us be thankful. Let us be grateful. Let us resist the entitlement. And whatever we do, in word or in deed, let us do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Amen.