

(3rd Sunday in Lent)

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Matthew 22:1-14

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son....”

A few Sundays ago, following our worship service, we had the pleasure of celebrating the marriage of Bruce Erickson and Lori Peterson. Theirs was a very simple, but beautiful ceremony, one that I was honored to officiate and you might have been blessed to attend.

Over the years, weddings have evolved from simple ceremonies in a church or the parlor of a home to elaborate affairs at venues created for the “all-inclusive” ceremony and reception or destination weddings in exotic locations.

According to the Market Research website, the wedding industry generates over \$72 billion dollars a year! The average wedding now costs \$32,000!

The least expensive state to be married in is Mississippi (\$17,500). The most expensive is Hawaii (\$39,000).

If you plan to get married in New York City, plan to spend an average of \$74,000!
(Business Insider)

In Wisconsin, the average wedding costs: \$24,681. (USA Today).

And that there is the honeymoon cost!

As a pastor, I have officiated at weddings like Bruce and Lori’s, and I have officiated at very elaborate, grand ceremonies.

Probably the most expensive and fanciest wedding I officiated at was in Indianapolis. It was a “black tie” affair. A small orchestra played during the ceremony. They had video production team to film it. The chancel was covered in floral arrangement which hardly left room for the wedding party of 20! Then there was the reception, which was a formal sit down affair with china, crystal and silver under a huge tent. I was simply the “rent-a-minister” as was our church.

Of course, most weddings pale-in-comparison to the royal weddings in Britain. Everybody who is anybody from government officials to celebrities to the average citizen or royal family groupies want to be in attendance.

What is the fanciest or funniest wedding you have ever attended? And did it the type of wedding make a difference as to what you wore to it?

Setting aside all the fancy trappings and expenses, who doesn't like to celebrate the marriage of a couple they know and love? Of course, we want to be invited to share in this joyous celebration - and, if you are like me, you can't wait to dance!

Even in Jesus' day weddings were a special cause for celebration.

If you recall, in John's Gospel, the first miracle Jesus is at the wedding feast in Cana (chapter 2) when after all ready celebrating for 3 days, at his mother's urging, he turns the water in to wine!

Throughout our sacred faith story from Deuteronomy to Isaiah to the Gospels to the Book of Revelation, the image of a great feast, like a wedding banquet, has been used as an eschatological image of abundance of God's grace and love.

At this feast, all people, not just those like us, would be invited guests at God's table. The food and wine would flow freely and there would be enough for all to share! And there would be no more pain and suffering, death and sorrow!

In Luke's Gospel, the writer has Jesus tell the story of a person who decided to throw a great feast. Invitations are sent via messengers. But the invited guests begin to make excuses for why they can't attend. This angers the host, as it might any one who has every planned such a party, only to have your hospitality rejected. So what does he do? Jesus says, he sends his messengers back out, this time to invite the poor and those with physical challenges. And when he finds that there is still plenty of room for more guests, he send them back out, telling them to compel others to join them, and they do!

This is one of the best stories about God's abundant grace, acceptance of and gracious hospitality for all people.

Then there is Matthew's version of Jesus story, which is as one bible scholar called it - "ugly"!

To understand the two very different versions of Jesus story, you need a bit of background. None of the Gospels are first hand account of Jesus' life and teachings. Actually, none of the original writings exist. Based on archeological research and biblical studies, scholars believe that Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels, written around 70 C.E.

Scholars believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke wrote somewhere between 85-90 C.E. When they wrote, both had a copy of Mark's Gospel and another source referred to as "Q".

Luke wrote his Gospel (and the book of Acts) in Greek to a Gentile audience (not Jewish). His audience would have understood the mythology of the Greek gods and great philosophers. So his Jesus comes across more like one of those.

Matthew, on the other hand, wrote his in Hebrew to a Jewish audience.

Luke's Gospel was written to those outside of Jesus' own Jewish faith tradition. Matthew was written to those within the Jesus faith tradition who considered Jesus the promised Messiah.

At the time of his writing several things had transpired. The Jewish community revolted against the Romans and the Jewish leadership who supported the Romans. The Romans in return destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. In the end, the Jewish people discovered Herod wasn't the political leader called to restore Israel to greatness. Others wondered if Jesus was?

Violence also broke out within the Jewish community. Blood was shed, people were killed in the violent debate over Jesus as the accepted Messiah.

Scholars believe Matthew's version of this wedding feast, when there is rejection, violence, bloodshed and murder, was heavily influenced by the actual violence and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. And you Game of Thrones fans think the Red Wedding episode was gruesome!

While the reaction by the king to the rejection of the initial guests is vastly different, the follow-up is similar in both Luke and Matthew. The king in Matthew's story, sends his servants back out to invite anyone and everyone, including the good and the bad, to his wedding feast. And just like in Luke's story, these guests come, filling the banquet hall! End of story!

Except, Matthew doesn't end the story there. The king shows up to greet his guests, only to discover one guest hasn't changed into the appropriate wedding garment. The king confronts his guest, saying, "Friend, how did you get in here dressed like that? After you came to the banquet why didn't you change?"

Then the king has his guards bind him and foot and throw him out of the banquet hall into the outer darkness where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth!"

Now, if you are like me, you might be wondering why Matthew would have added this extra storyline? How can you blame that guy for not being dressed appropriately for a banquet he suddenly got an invitation to attend? Did Matthew leave something out? Did this person have a chance to clean up and change before he arrived? Scholars struggle to answer that question.

What is suggested, and this I believe, Matthew added this as way of addressing the issue of accountability of the “good and bad” who have accepted God’s gracious invitation.

God, who is empathetic towards us, showing us an abundance of grace and compassion, does hold us accountable for our response to his abundant grace and generous hospitality.

We can’t just simply show up, share in the joyful feast of the people of God, feasting on the love of Christ, without being transformed by that love, which changes how we live in relationship to one another.

This last storyline isn’t about what we wear on the outside to church, as much how we have changed in our hearts and lives.

We come, grateful to be included at the table, thinking we are the “good” guests and not those “bad” ones who, we all know, deserved to be kicked out. We don’t but “they” do.

We seek God’s compassions and mercy, grace and forgiveness, but then like person whose debt was forgiven, refuse to extend that same grace and compassion to others who are different than we are - the immigrants, refugees, people of color or another religion, the unemployed or underemployed, or live across the “tracks” or in another country.

Matthew is reminding his audience then and now, that it is not enough to show up to God’s feast, there is an expectation place on us as God’s guests to change too.

So what are you wearing to the wedding banquet?

“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 of God, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be grateful, sharing with others all that God has shared with you.”