

“What are you wearing to the wedding?”
Matthew 22:1-14

Weddings are a very interesting way to think about the kingdom of heaven. In one sense they are very simple. When I meet with couples who want to get married, and we begin to talk about the wedding I tell them that this is really very simple. If they have the appropriate license and they stand in front of me and say “Yes” and “I do” at the appropriate time I can get them married.

But everything that happens before and everything that happens after can become quite complex, in more ways than one. The wedding banquet that Jesus describes in this story is filled with both complexity and simplicity all at the same time.

Jesus begins by telling us that a king is having a wedding banquet for his son. You know right off the bat that this is going to be a big deal, at least for the king. His son is getting married, and it would be normal to expect that this wedding would also be a great occasion for all who were invited to the wedding. However, this does not appear to be the case. Those who were invited seem strangely oblivious to the importance of this occasion so the king gives them the benefit of the doubt.

He sends other messengers with the reminder that this is not just any wedding banquet, but he wants everyone to know that he has spared no expense, and he personally has been involved in the preparation of the banquet. He has held nothing back. This is not a catered affair. The king says, “I, personally, have prepared this meal.” This is not just one elaborate wedding banquet among others. Even though he doesn’t come right out and say it, we can guess that this is his only son. We can guess this because he holds nothing back.

We would rightfully expect that he would kill the fatted calves for this occasion. That is what you do when you have a big party, but this king has also slaughtered his oxen as well. The oxen are the animals who do the work; this king has liquidated his capital and equity as well. There is not going to be another wedding banquet like this, because this king won’t have the wherewith all to prepare for it.

What are we to make of this extravagance? Obviously, this wedding and this son is of supreme importance to this king, so the invitation to this wedding is not just one more invitation to one more wedding – there isn’t going to be another, this is it, well, for the king it is it but this wedding obviously doesn’t seem to register as much importance for those who are invited.

The king is patient at first. He thinks that perhaps those invited don’t quite realize the extent to which he has gone all out for this occasion. I like to go out to eat myself, and there are many very nice restaurants here in Manatee County. We

all have our favorites, and it is always nice to make new discoveries as well, but many of you have heard me say that my favorite place to eat is 2012 5th Street West. I know the cook there rather well; she is very good, and it is not just the good meals she prepares but I know they are prepared and served with love.

So when she says, "The meal is ready," what do I do? I come to the table. Not to come to the table is not just to delay the meal, it would not be grateful of our relationship. But those invited to this wedding banquet just don't seem to get it.

Jesus tells us that, even given a second chance, they made light of the invitation. We can only guess what is going on in their minds. At the very least, they are missing out on what surely promises to be the meal of the season.

Maybe they think the king has gone too far with his extravagance. Perhaps they are calculating enough to estimate that by personally investing so much in this meal that he has overextended himself and has actually squandered his authority. If so, they have grossly miscalculated the assets of this king; it is clear in Jesus story that this is not just a king, this is the king.

But we also need to be fair to these people as well. After all, they are in all probability busy people with many responsibilities, and they don't have any more time than the rest of us do. After all farms don't take care of themselves. Fields don't get tilled, crops don't get planted, harvests don't get reaped on a wing and a prayer. Businesses left unattended are not like canned goods on a shelf; they do have an expiration date and left unattended, they can get stale quicker than you might imagine.

But the king is the king, and their not showing up, their dismissive attitude is a direct insult to the king. Their dismissive attitude toward the king's authority is not ignored, but their demise is almost an aside because the king is still focused on the readiness of the banquet.

The food is ready; it is going to get cold so decisive, expansive action is called for and the king throws caution and propriety to the wind. "Forget the engraved invitations and all the carefully prepared seating arrangements," he tells his slaves, "Go out there and get whoever you can to come to the banquet. I don't care what you have to promise." It really seems that this king is more concerned with filling the place up than with any concern for quality.

But there is more than one thing going on here, for just as it seems like the celebration is going well and the slaves themselves can begin to get in the swing of things and joining in the festivities, the king begins to greet the guests, and one seemingly unsuspecting guest gets the evil eye from the king; he is not wearing a wedding robe.

The king seems to know this guy, at least he calls him “Friend,” but there is not a hint of friendliness in his question, “How did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And this man, unlike the previously invited guests has no excuses at all, he is speechless.

It seems that everything that can go wrong is going wrong with this wedding and more. What are we to make of it? What is Jesus teaching in this parable? It has a lot to say about what I would like to call “Complexity” and “making a difference.”

What I mean by “complexity” is coming to the place where you have the grace to realize that just because you have experienced tragedy in your life does not mean that your entire future is lost or that you are condemned to sinking into a swamp of despair. “Complexity” is having the ability to remember even very tragic circumstances from more than one point of view and more than one dimension.

Let me give you a couple examples. Several people who had gone through painful divorces were interviewed.¹ One person described her life this way, “What good is anything without someone to share it with? My current goal is to make enough money to pay my monthly bills without taking money out of my savings account.” Sounds like a sad life, doesn’t it.

Another woman describes recovering from a divorce that was just as devastating, but she talks about it this way, “I feel fortunate in a backhanded way to have experienced misfortune as a young woman. I feel it taught me humility ... and the ability to regroup ... Life is good but not lavish. It’s hard work and I have learned we have to give each other a hand every once in a while.” By the grace of God this woman has learned even from a very painful and tragic experience.

There was a story in the New York Times with the headline, “No Wedding, But the Cake Isn’t Wasted.”² The story told about a woman named Kathleen Gooley who was to have been married but a week before the wedding the groom got cold feet and backed out. The couple had already paid for the caterer for the reception and the reception hall so Ms Gooley along with 150 guests from homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and a drug rehabilitation center dined on hors d’oeuvres, garden salad, fruit cup, stuffed chicken breast, string beans almondine, baked potato, cake and ice cream, but no alcoholic beverages.

Everyone had a fantastic time including Ms Gooley who said, “This is better than a wedding. It is making 150 people happy. If it were a wedding, I would have been the only person who was happy.” Perhaps you can think of a better way to describe that; until I hear a better way, let’s call it the gift of “complexity.”

¹ Benedict Carey in “New York Times” January 1, 2008

² Jack Curry in “New York Times” June 24, 1990

Sometimes when we think of our efforts to make a difference in this world we think of all the problems in the world that need fixed, and while individually we have a lot on our plates, it is the good and generous thing to take time to volunteer to try to make a difference. Without actually saying it, it is almost as if God is overwhelmed and we ought to give up some of our spare time and give God a hand.

But Jesus uses this parable to shake us out of our smugness and self congratulations by this unsuspecting man who is accosted by the king for not wearing a wedding robe. This wedding robe has proved troubling to many people over the centuries. St Augustine saw it as love while Martin Luther actually made fun of anyone who thought it was anything other than faith. Calvin tweaked that a little bit to have it be a symbol of both faith and works. I actually don't think any of them are wrong but I like John Wesley's take on it; he said the robe was the "new creation." Actually in the first few hundred years of the church, there was no discussion at all; the robe was the robe of baptism, and it meant that even though salvation was open to all, it was by no means a walk in the park to be taken for granted. There are no absentee ballots in baptism.

Baptism meant putting the rest of one's life in jeopardy in order to enjoy being at the wedding banquet. Being baptized meant being prepared to show that it meant everything to you. It means that God has already made all the difference that matters in Christ, and what is crucial is the degree to which we are willing to allow ourselves to be made different by the difference made in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "See, I am making all things new."

Last week Christine mentioned ReFocus and she related one question that had been asked. The question was "What is the goal here?" When the question was asked me, I did not have a quick answer, but like Christine said, it is a very good question. It asks, like this parable I believe, for a very personal answer.

I ask myself, "Where am I in this parable?" My answer, I don't know about you, but I am one of those dead people because I really don't have any excuses. So, if you ask me what is my goal, right now, I will put it this way, "At the end of my ministry and at the end of my life I want to be more in love with Jesus than I am now.

And that means I have a lot more dying and a lot more surrendering to do. I need to continue to die to judging others. I need to die to condoning violence against others. I need to forgive everyone I may see as my enemies. I need to die to my exaggerated needs for security and control, to be better than others.

I need to surrender to the love of Jesus Christ in my life and learn from his gentle spirit in every circumstance of my life because I have had a taste of that heavenly banquet right here in this life and if the hors d'ouerves are any clue, and I think they are, the rest of the banquet is incredible, and I don't mind not being

speechless, because I know one who will speak on my behalf, and that is all I will ever need.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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