

Isaiah 25:1-9

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. 2For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. 3Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. 4For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, 5the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. 8Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

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, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated 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.”

The Wedding Feast October 15, 2017

Weddings are often stressful, aren't they? There is at least a year of planning and organizing. A guest list to put together. Who should we invite and who should we not? How much can we afford or how much are we willing to go into debt for? What color and style of wedding dress? And what about those bridesmaid's dresses? A testament to just how much your girlfriends really love you! And what about the dinners and the reception and the cake and gifts? Keeping a healthy distance from the bride or her mother prior to the wedding is probably a wise choice if you know what's good for you. It reminds me of a story I heard of a woman who arrived late for a wedding. As she came rushing up to the door, an usher asked her for her invitation. "I have none," she snapped. "Are you a friend of the groom?" he asked. "Certainly not!" the woman replied, "I'm the bride's mother!"

So, it doesn't surprise me really, that Matthew uses a wedding feast as the context for this final parable where Jesus concludes his conversation with the Scribes, Pharisees and Priests about their rejection of him as the messiah and those who are welcome in the kingdom. A wedding just adds to the tension level and maybe Matthew uses it to heighten the importance of the issue for his own community as well. This story is found in the gospel of Luke as well as the non-canonical gospel of Thomas. In Luke's version the story is about someone who gave a great dinner rather than a king giving a wedding feast. There is also no mention of the destruction of those who refuse

the invitation or of the last sort of mini parable of the guest who has no wedding robe on and is thus thrown into outer darkness and gnashing of teeth.

The enhancement of the story by Matthew from dinner party to wedding feast may just be his way of elevating the importance of the invitation to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah in light of the current conflict that is happening in his own community. We have to remember that the writer is a human being with a reason for saying and preaching what he does in the context of his own life and community. Matthew's community of faith is still the minority religion, still in deep debate and conflict with their Jewish brothers and sisters and families that do not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

This is born out in the language of the previous parables of the two brothers, and the tenants of the vineyard who didn't honor the landowner and killed his servants and his son. This theme continues in this parable and Matthew is not above pointing out that, from his perspective, their failure to accept Jesus and follow his way of grace, mercy, justice and love, certainly led to the destruction of the temple. Remember that Matthew is writing around 80-90 CE and the temple was destroyed in 70CE. This is what he is referring to when he inserts into the middle of what would be a very comforting parable, the angry king who sends his army to destroy them and the town. This is one of those very disturbing moments in the story and I think it may be one of those things that I'll want to ask Matthew and Jesus about when I get to heaven because it sure comes out of left field here doesn't it?

But I guess if we are honest there is often a bit of darkness to the parables. There is that hint or threat of judgment that we can't just dismiss or not consider. There is a seriousness about accepting an invitation into God's kingdom, one that you should consider before saying, yes. And it is highlighted again at the very end when after the feast is open to all those on the street, no matter whether good or bad, there is still one who gets thrown out because he isn't dressed in a wedding robe. Yikes! And while we have no good answer for why this story is here it is certainly one that gets our attention.

Professor Tom Long once related something that, as he himself admitted, may sound like the set-up for a joke but that is actually a real story. He said that one day, Barbara Brown Taylor, Fred Craddock, and he, all attended an Atlanta Braves baseball game. Unbeknownst to them and to others in the stands that day, a man several rows ahead of them was apparently causing problems. The next thing they knew, several burly men wearing bright yellow shirts with the word "SECURITY" written across their backs barreled down the aisle, lifted this apparently troublesome man from his seat, and carried him clean out of the stadium. The crowd sat in stunned silence until finally the somewhat high-pitched voice of Fred Craddock piped up to say, "Obviously he didn't have a wedding garment on!" Now that's funny I don't care who you are!

Scott Hoeszee who shared this in his commentary, goes on to say: "Probably to some of the people there at the ballpark that day, the reference to a "wedding garment" seemed to come from out of nowhere and made no sense to them. If you do not know this parable in Matthew 22, then how could you know what Craddock's wise crack meant? But really, even within this parable, this mention of a wedding garment comes as a bit of a surprise in that such attire had not been mentioned earlier. It's even a little hard to know what it means or what it stands for today.

But at the very least it may mean this: the party is finally God's party and everyone there is there by grace alone. You had to be clothed with grace to be there and no matter what you may think of the wedding garment of grace when it is handed to you, you either put it on or risk getting pitched out of the party. There is no other way to be at the party without wearing the attire the master assigns. Those who think they got there some other way or who think they can do without the clothing of grace everyone else is wearing, will soon find out how wrong they are."

I read somewhere that at weddings like this one, that if you didn't have a wedding garment to wear the host would provide one for you as you came into the feast. I love that idea and I hope it is true, because that seems to be what God does for us and always has done for us. He clothes us in his mercy and grace and forgiveness. It reminds me

of baptism which Paul so beautifully speaks of in Galatians 3 where he says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are in Christ Jesus.”

And what this story tells me is that there is no limit to the invitation to God’s party. That all are welcome and all are invited. And yes, there is a catch. You have to say, “Yes”. You have to repent, turn around, and change directions and come through the door. Stop believing that you can decide your own fate or that you can make it on your own strength. You’ll have to take off your worldly robes or your robes of self-righteousness, and let Christ put upon you His robe. This metaphorical wedding robe, the clothes of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and baptism, which assures your place at the party. Something God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. You should expect to be changed by this encounter.

I love weddings. I love the beauty and pageantry, the liturgies, the music (sometimes), but especially, I love to hear those words of commitment and promise that couples make to each other. And it is often a time for those in attendance to think about their own vows and promises to those they love and perhaps re-commit to them, or perhaps wonder what went wrong along the way. Weddings can stir up a lot of deep feelings and nostalgia.

And then there is the wedding reception! What a feast they can be sometimes. I was at one recently where there were beautiful tables set up with gorgeous decorations, all set in this beautiful barn. Some of you were there. There was dancing and drinks, good food and fellowship, tears and great laughter.

And isn’t that such a wonderful image of the kingdom of God? A lavish wedding party where all are invited and everyone can experience for a moment absolute joy! And I think that is one thing about weddings that really are so powerful and that is, that for a moment, we can all enjoy a sense of hopefulness. That for a moment as two people pledge their lives to one another, and hear promises of God’s abiding love as well, that we too, for just a flicker of a moment, know that we too can live in love’s promise, that we too, can depend on the God of Love. That as Isaiah reminded us, the fear of death will be swallowed up forever and the future is full of possibility.

And while everyone doesn’t get invited to a wedding, everyone is invited into God’s kingdom. The good and the bad. All those who feel they are on the outside. And all those who feel they are on the inside. The high and the low, the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, the CEO and the homeless, the warden and the prisoner, All those who know that they cannot make it on their own strength, but wholly lean on God, knowing that their true identity is found in the clothes that He adorns them with.

I’ve said this before and I’ll keep saying it, “The Good News of the Gospel is that all, all, all, all, **all**—those who are near and those who are far off—are invited; all, all, all, all, **all**— are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God.” The invitation still stands and the party is always just about ready to get under way. So...Will you come? Will you? Thanks Be to God. Amen.