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Title: Wedding Reception RSVP

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Text: [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

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Today is a continuation of our look at the parables that Jesus tells in the last week of his life as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Pastor Randy has been leading us on our journey through these parables and when he asked me to preach this week, he had already looked at this passage that was coming next in the Matthew parable series.

Before you get down on him for handing me the hard stuff, to his credit, he told me that I was welcome to go a different direction. Perhaps something like one of the other lectionary passages for today – maybe the one from Philippians 4. – “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” Ahh, that sounds wonderful. As soon as I decided on the Philippians passage, I heard the voice of my preaching professor telling me to never shy away from the hard scriptures. They are there for a reason. So, here we are. Matthew it is.

Let's just admit it: this is an ugly parable. No amount of generalizing about God's hospitality or vulnerability or invitation is going to do away with that. Sometimes, even with parables, we want to think they represent an event in history. But parables are stories, sometimes stories that are far-fetched and unbelievable. This makes it easier for these stories to make their point and lets listeners more easily find a deeper meaning.

So enough putting off dealing with it. The sooner we start; the sooner this can be over.

Have you ever received an invitation to a party that you did not want to attend? What did you do about that? Did you simply RSVP a "NO" or did you mistreat, abuse, and murder the mail carrier? The latter is what happens in this parable. A wedding banquet was prepared for the king's son. Those invited didn't come. He then sends his slaves to others that had been invited but they have more important things to do – a farm, a business. Those invited abuse the messengers and kill them which sends the king into a rage.

On the flip side, have you ever invited people to your party who did not attend? You cleaned, you cooked, you decorated. The table was set, the candles were lit, the music was playing. Everything was ready but some of the guests didn't come. Did it make you so angry that you killed them and burned down their houses? That's what happens here - the king sends troops and murders the murderers and burns their city.

The king needs a full house for the wedding reception. Verses 9 and 10 tells how he fills the wedding hall. "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 who they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests." (Matthew 22:9-10).

There's a bit of a pause in the text here. Usually, we keep reading the next four verses because it's the completion of the wedding party story but many see what happens next as a separate parable. So whether you see it as one parable or two, the king arrives, sees a man there without proper wedding attire.

"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." (Matthew 22:11-14).

I'm always struck that there is only one sentence between the king calling the man a "friend" and throwing him into the outer darkness. That's the story. That's the parable or parables and, unlike some parables, Jesus doesn't give us the guidebook on how to interpret this one so we're on our own.

This parable is also known to Luke and to the author of the Gospel of Thomas, a gospel that didn't make it into the Bible. Matthew shapes it to his distinct purposes. The Luke and Thomas versions are much nicer - no killing or burning whatsoever - it's the one we teach to our kids. It's the one I learned a song about at camp - "I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum, pray have me excused, I cannot come."

Whereas Luke and Thomas talk about a "great dinner," Matthew changes it to a wedding banquet given by a king to make the refusal of the invited guests even harder to imagine or justify.

Last week, the parable indicted the Jewish religious leaders for failing to heed the prophets and for killing the legal heir and son of the vineyard owner. It ended with the ominous prediction – cleverly placed in the mouth of the religious leaders – that God would give the vineyard – Israel – to new tenants and crush the wicked ones. This week, the implicit violence of the story becomes explicit.

To put this ugly parable in its proper context we have to understand that, like last week, we are catching a glimpse of the low point in an intense family feud. I want to emphasize the word "family" here because Matthew and his community are caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah and, in particular, whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah Israel's prophets had promised. This is not a Jewish-Christian dispute. However, in the centuries that follow Christians have used and continue to use this passage to further their anti-Semitism. This is written out of the pain of a community separated from its own family.¹

Matthew and his community understood themselves as faithful Jews who had responded to God's summons to the kingdom banquet offered in honor of God's Messiah, Jesus. But others had inexplicably rejected the great invitation, ignoring or persecuting both the prophets of old and the new missionaries of this good news.

In Matthew's world, a burning city would have called to mind Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, interpreted here as God's judgment on those who rejected the new thing God was doing in Jesus. An unexpected invitation to commoners on the main streets points toward the surprising ways the invitation to God's kingdom banquet is increasingly extended to and embraced by those once considered outsiders.

But before we decide that Matthew is just assuring his community that they are on the right side of salvation history, we get the warning about self-satisfaction. This comes in the scene where we are introduced to the person at the banquet without a proper robe. Many assume this is just a dress code violation and could mean that you shouldn't wear jeans to church. It's not about attire at all (and it is OK if you wear jeans – God doesn't care).

It's my take, and that of good scholars, that the new guests are beneficiaries of an unexpectedly generous invitation and they have to be on guard against

the complacency shown by the first invitees. They would have been given a robe at the wedding and not expected to bring their own. The doors of the kingdom community are thrown wide open, and the invitation extends literally to all. But once you come in, there are standards. You can't go on acting like you are not at an extraordinary party. There are responsibilities that you have to take on when you claim the name Christian. Those responsibilities are something you wear like you would wear a wedding robe to a wedding banquet in that day and time. Coming in just to soak up the goodness of being Christian without ACTIVELY being a Christian – ACTIVELY LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR – is like coming to the banquet but not putting on the robe.

The first group didn't show up at all. The second group had a laundry list of excuses for things that were more important than showing up. The third group showed up but some were just there as consumers and didn't give importance to being fully present and active in the banquet.

British bishop N.T. Wright comments on the parable this way: "Jesus' love reached those who were invited to the feast where they were, but his love refused to let them stay as they were. Love wants the best for the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed, and changed."

"The point of the story is," continues Bishop Wright, "that . . . God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying you don't want to stay at the party."²

God loves us as we are, but God expects us to clothe ourselves with the character of Jesus Christ. You might remember one of the best-selling songs of the 1970s, "My Sweet Lord" by former Beatle George Harrison. The song was about Harrison's sincere desire to find God through various kinds of religions. Let's see if I can stick this song in your head for the rest of the day...

AUDIO CLIP - "My sweet Lord/ Oh, my Lord/ My sweet Lord/ I really wanna be with You/ I like to see You, Lord/ Oh, it takes so long, my Lord/ I really wanna know You/ I really wanna see You/ I wanna show You Lord/That it won't take long, my Lord/My sweet Lord."

Shortly before he died in 2001, Harrison was asked about his spiritual journey. The question was apt since it was Harrison who introduced the Beatles to Eastern religion in the 60s and after the group broke up, he wrote "My Sweet Lord." To the end of his life, Harrison continued to investigate

spiritual matters in a variety of religions. He summed up his priorities this way: "Everything else in life can wait, but the search for God cannot wait."³

"My Sweet Lord" was a song for all who seek God. Harrison's song cut across all religious faiths. While we can't claim it exclusively as a Christian song, we can relate to its sentiment. We all want to find and to be found by God. The good news is that we have been found. Even when we feel like we cannot find God, God has found us. God has come and found us where we are.

But the key to our life in God is more than to just show up. It means establishing the other person, the neighbor, as our priority. It means seeing them for who they are and not who we want them to be or think they should be. It means opening ourselves to receive their life into our own. It means letting go of our agendas, distractions, fears, and prejudices. It means bringing and offering all that we are and all that we have.

If we're not doing that with others we're probably not doing it with God either. Instead, we too often go our separate ways, to our farms and businesses. We're too busy, too tired, too distracted. There's work to be done and money to be made. We make light of the other's life and what is being offered. We're convinced we have better things to do and better places to be.

To show up and be actively present is to be worthy before God. It's that simple and it's that difficult. We don't earn or prove our worthiness as a prerequisite to entering the banquet. We show up, be present, and discover for ourselves the worthiness God has always known about us. That's when our lives begin to change.

What should we say in the presence of God when asked about our attire? Start with words that convey honestly to God who you are and where you find yourself. "God, I'm hungry, I smelled the food of the banquet and trust you to feed me. God, I am lonely. I saw the lights on here. I trust you to take me in. God, I'm thirsty for forgiveness. I thought there would be a table set. God, I was sad and grieving. I heard music and laughter and thought there would be joy to share. God, I was dying and the door was open. I trusted there would be new life here."⁴

Any of those things is enough to say. Then the king would say, "Oh, my dear friend, I'm so glad you got my invitation. I'm so glad you are here. Welcome."

¹ Lose, David. Pentecost 18A: Preaching an Ugly Parable found on his site, www.davidlose.net in his commentary called "...In the Meantime." October 2014.

² Lose, David. Pentecost 18A: Preaching an Ugly Parable found on his site, www.davidlose.net in his commentary called "...In the Meantime." October 2014.

³ Information about "My Sweet Lord" by George Harrison found at www.beatlesbible.com
Idea for this cadence found in a sermon by Michael K. Marsh titled, "An Open Invitation," (October 12, 2014) and found at his site called Interrupting the Silence, www.interruptingthesilence.com.⁴