

Festive Attire Preferred
Dr. D. William McIvor
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In today's text Jesus tells a parable about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. When invitations for a wedding were sent out in those days, the time of the wedding was not specified; the invitation simply alerted guests to be prepared. When the feast itself was ready, messengers went out again and told everyone to come. They could arrive quickly because they were already prepared.

In this parable, however, the guests do not arrive. In fact, they continue their normal routines of life and business. Some even mistreat and kill the messengers. This angers the king, as we can imagine, and while the food is still waiting on the tables, he sends armies to destroy the city.

After his armies return, the king still wants a wedding for his son. So he tells his servants to go into the streets and invite anyone and everyone — good and bad alike. Then the king goes to look at the guests who have arrived. He sees one man who is not dressed appropriately. So he tells his servants to tie up that man and throw him out. That seems a little unfair because the man was invited off the streets and had no time to prepare for a wedding. How could the king expect him to dress appropriately? Even more unfair is what the king says: "Throw him into the outer darkness." Outer darkness is a Bible code word for hell.

Like most of his parables, Jesus tells this extraordinary story to challenge us about how we live as his disciples. Let's read it in Matthew 22.

Matthew 22.1-14 (NRSV)

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, while 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."

Introduction

Next Saturday evening is the gala banquet during the weekend celebration of the church's 50th Anniversary. When the invitation went out about the gala banquet, it said "festive attire

preferred.” That phrase raised some questions for a lot of people, many of which were directed at me. What does “festive attire” mean? Does it mean gentlemen should wear a tuxedo, renting one if they don’t own one? Does it mean ladies should wear a long dress? Does it mean that I’m going to be like a doorman at some snooty club and decide who gets in depending on how you dress? No, no, no. Festive attire really means just this: the banquet is a happy and fun occasion and we want to look nice. I’m going to wear what I’m wearing right now, this blue suit.

But all of this made me think of that poor guy in Jesus’ parable. He wasn’t wearing a blue suit or anything remotely appropriate for being at a king’s banquet. And that’s when we realize this parable is not concerned with realism. In real life, wedding guests do not kill messengers no matter how much they don’t want to go to a wedding. Kings do not send armies to destroy a city while the food is getting cold. Guests are not invited off the street and if they are, they are not kicked out because of inappropriate dress. Even if they are tossed out, they end up back in the street, not in the outer darkness of hell. This is not a parable about real life.

But it is about a real problem that we always face: what does it mean to be saved by grace? Grace comes to us just because God loves us. But having been loved, having been “graced,” how do we live? Can we live like hell when we’ve been graced by heaven? Most Christian teaching has always answered *no*. Grace means everyone is invited by God into the heavenly banquet but we’ve got to be dressed appropriately if we want to stay. Here are a couple of thoughts to help us think about this.

ONE: We must respond to grace

First, we must respond to grace. Grace saves because it comes from God. But grace can’t save if we don’t respond to it.

I remember a story my band director told when I was in junior high. I think he was upset because someone missed the cue in one of the pieces we were rehearsing. Maybe I missed the cue. So he told us about the days when many towns had their own bands and how one particular town didn’t have anyone to play the cymbals. They were rehearsing a number that just had to have a cymbal player. The cymbals only had one note to play but it was right near the end and if it was missed, the whole piece was spoiled. So at considerable expense and effort, the band director hired a cymbal player from another town to come and play this one note during the concert. The hired player wasn’t able to come beforehand and rehearse with the band but he assured the director that he knew the music and exactly when to play.

Finally the day of the concert arrived. The cymbal player also arrived just in time to take his cymbals and slip into place on the bandstand as the music began.

It was a grand performance. The townsfolk were smiling happily, nodding and commenting that the band had never sounded better. The band played on and the music was reaching its climax. The director was pumping away furiously, and at the right moment he turned to cue the cymbal player for his all important note ... and the cymbal player was asleep.

He awoke quickly when the director’s baton hit him in the middle of his forehead.

I don’t know why I have remembered that story but it impressed on me never to miss my cue. It’s probably the only thing I do well. I am a one note guy. I always preach to you the love of God. Cue me and I’m going to bang the cymbals for the love of God. I don’t ever want to miss that cue.

But my band director’s story also cuts the other way. When God cues us, we need to play. We cannot think about playing. We cannot wish we were playing. We cannot intend to play. We cannot

plan to play. We must play. We have to respond to grace. Everyone is invited into the band — that’s grace. But we’ve got to play when God cues us. We must actively respond to grace.

The response is important. Remember when the king confronted the man who was improperly dressed? The text says, “And he was speechless.” The original language of that word means willfully, disobediently silent. He was asked a question by his king and he refused to answer. He had a good excuse for not dressing properly because he was invited off the street. But he refused to speak. He refused to respond to the gracious invitation. His silence signals that the response to grace is all important for without a response grace cannot bloom into life.

TWO: Our response to grace must be specific

A second thought is that our response to grace must be specific. Scholars have long argued about the image of the wedding robe we should put on in response to the gracious invitation of the king. Augustine said our response should be love. Martin Luther said it is faith. John Calvin said we are to live into the image of Christ.¹ But what does this really look like specifically?

There was a *New Yorker* cartoon some years ago that showed a well-dressed man in a big city walking past a doomsday prophet holding a sign which said, “Prepare To Meet Your Maker.” The man reacts by stopping in front of a window where he could see his reflection and he took off his hat, smoothed his hair, and straightened his tie.² We smile at that but the cartoonist captured something important. The response may seem small or inadequate but we cannot meet God without some specific response.

And don’t you think we get far too casual about meeting with God. I mean, waltzing into this sanctuary on Sunday mornings like we stop at the qwik-mart for a quart of milk, doesn’t seem quite right. This is where we come to worship *the Creator of the Universe!* We must take God seriously and prepare ourselves in specific ways to be with God. God’s grace saves. But specifically what do we do to receive it?

But some people may still ask, “Okay, preacher, but do I really need to do specific things to be a Christian?”

- Do I really need to go to church to be a Christian? The honest answer is, “Well, no.”
- Do I need to tithe or even give to be a Christian? “No.”
- Do I need to teach Sunday School to be a Christian? I’d like to say “yes” but the answer is “no.”

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Volume II, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990) 777. Augustine said the wedding garment is the love of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul said, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ... Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” (1 Cor. 13.1, 4-5a)

Martin Luther said the wedding garment was faith: “faith, which puts on the righteousness of Christ, is the true wedding garment. It is active through love and does the works of love.”

John Calvin said “There is no point in arguing about the marriage garment, whether it is faith or a holy and godly life; for faith cannot be separated from good works and good works proceed only from faith. All Christ wants to say here is that we are called by the Lord under the condition that we be renewed in our spirits in His image, and therefore, if we are to remain always in His house, the old man with all his blemishes is to be cast off and we are to practice the new life so that our appearance (lit. clothing) may correspond to our honorable calling.”

² Karen Pidcock-Lester, “Sermon Reviews,” *Lectionary Homiletics* 1.11 (1990): 12.

- Do I need to witness to others to be a Christian? “No.”
- Do I need to stop all my bad habits to be a Christian? “No.”
- Do I really need to do anything to be a Christian? Other than acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, “no.”

You see, that’s grace. There are no conditions. Entering the king’s gala banquet is free and open to all.

But it’s not the whole picture. Grace requires a specific response because without it there is no evidence of grace. We need to wear the wedding robe that God’s gracious invitation demands and this is the very tension built into this parable. Our response does not save us yet without it we cannot be saved.

Conclusion

The reason grace requires a response, of course, is that there is a cost to grace. There is a cost for God giving grace and there is a cost for us responding to it. In a story that comes from Civil War days, a young New England woman had just become engaged when the Civil War broke out and her fiancé was called into the Union army. Their wedding was postponed. Throughout that long and bloody conflict the young man escaped injury and he often wrote to his beloved to tell her of his devotion and to let her know he was well. Near the end of the war, at what became known as the Battle of the Wilderness, he was grievously wounded, but, of course, at the time his bride-to-be did not know of his condition. She often reread his letters, counting the days until his return. But finally the letters stopped coming.

After several weeks one did come but it was in unfamiliar handwriting. It said, “There has been a terrible battle. It is very difficult for me to tell you this, but I have lost both my arms. I cannot write myself so a friend is writing this letter for me. While you are as dear to me as ever, I feel I should release you from the obligation of our engagement.”

The woman never answered that letter. Instead, she boarded the next train and went directly to the battlefield hospital at which her fiancé was being tended. When she arrived she found the captain and he gave directions to her soldier’s cot. Tearfully she searched for her beloved and the moment she found him, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I will never give you up!” she cried. “These hands of mine will be your hands. I will take care of you.”³

There is always a cost to grace and because there is a cost there must always be a response to grace. To accept grace that soldier had to pay the cost of giving up his pride and accept his fiancée’s love. That woman had to give up a “normal” life with her husband-to-be and accept him as he was. If neither or both did not respond to grace, there would be no grace.

So we end today with the same tension that ends the parable: Grace — Response to Grace. Do we respond appropriately to God’s gracious invitation? Sorting this out is the daily challenge of faithful Christian living. May God help us along the way.

³ Dennis J. DeHaan, ed., *Windows on the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 93.