

## The Wedding Crasher Matthew 22: 1-14

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 12<sup>th</sup> October 2008

After reading this text, it might be difficult for us to say, “This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!” So, let’s get right to the point. It’s the question you’re probably asking: *what’s up with the robe?* Isn’t the King overreacting here just a little? Couldn’t he just politely ask him to leave the wedding? Maybe find a robe for the guy to wear? He was invited, after all, wasn’t he? He received an invitation to attend the wedding feast. But he was a man of the streets, down and out, maybe homeless, and obviously poor. How could he be judged for not wearing a wedding robe? And judged he was, bound hand and foot, thrown out into outer darkness where he wept and gnashed his teeth. “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Ouch.

We might have wished that Jesus’ parable ended with the wedding hall filled with guests, good and bad alike. We have a King who invites guests to a wedding feast, but they came up with excuses why they can’t attend. The invitees even murder the king’s messengers. The king is furious – he sends out troops to destroy the murderers, burn their cities. Then he invites those unworthy to be invited to such a lavish feast – the poor, those living on the streets, on the margins – with the finest food and wine. The story becomes an expression of God’s grace, of welcoming the unworthy into the kingdom. In Luke’s gospel, the parable ends here.

In Matthew we see what happens when the king arrives in the banquet hall to welcome his guests. That’s when he eyes this poor man, this apparent intruder and interloper. “Friend, who let you in here?” but not really meaning “friend,” but more like a bouncer saying, “Listen, guy” or “Buster, who let you in here?” He’s speechless. Before he’s able to utter a word he’s thrown out.

What’s going on here? If you’re disturbed and confused by this parable, then it’s working its magic, doing what it’s supposed to do. Parables are designed to surprise and shock, astonish and provoke, make us feel uncomfortable. They cause us to sit up and take notice, to wake us up! They’re designed to teach, designed to help us see, hear, and understand in new ways. If it doesn’t make sense, then there’s an occasion to discover something new – about ourselves.

Matthew communicates indirectly through allegory. Not every parable uses allegory, but this one does. His readers would have known how to decode the parable; something like this: King=God; son=Jesus; marriage feast= great marriage feast of the Lamb of God at the end of time (see Rev. 19:9); slaves=prophets; those invited=Israel; violence=Israel’s rejection of prophets; destroyed city=fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D.; gathering of good and bad=evangelistic mission of the church, welcoming everyone; wedding hall=church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is Thomas Long’s helpful summary of the allegory/parable in *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 246. I’m indebted to Long’s masterful commentary on this text.

But the robe, the robe has stumped a lot of commentators and preachers. St. Augustine (354-430) said the robe represented love. Martin Luther (1483-1546) derided those who saw it as anything other than faith; John Calvin (1509-1564) saw it as both faith and works.<sup>2</sup>

If you're sitting in Matthew's church and hear this parable, there's probably only one association you would have – *your baptismal robe*. The robe symbolizes the Christian life. Like other clothing metaphors in the New Testament, this garment represents putting on the baptismal garment of Christ.<sup>3</sup> The baptismal robe was placed upon you after your baptism, after having come up out of the water. There were two reasons for this: one practical reason, you were baptized nude. The second is theological. Baptism points to dying and rising – dying to the old self and rising to the new self in Christ. It symbolizes putting on a new life. Putting on a new robe attests to the new life one has in Christ. The robe is the new attire of Christians who are now, as Paul put it, “clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)” This verse is often read at weddings, but it's really a baptismal text. Again, pointing to the new life one puts on in Christ. It's the robe that identifies us as different, set apart, indicating that we're dressed for the part and not simply showing up for the food and drink, taking what we wish and then return back to the streets unchanged.

The sermon title is The Wedding Crasher refers not this nameless man in the parable. He was invited, as we are invited by grace into the banquet hall of the church. But unless our external lives demonstrate the difference Christ has made in our lives, then *we* run the risk of becoming wedding crashers, really unfit for the wedding. “Many are called, few are chosen,” as we heard. Jesus' words echo an old Jewish saying that goes, “everybody gets called but not everybody ends up worthy of it.” Or, we might say in light of this text: “God wants everybody at the party, but not everybody wants to come or knows how to behave when they get here.”

More is required of us than merely showing up at the punch bowl, regardless of our attire. In other words, “we cannot, as this man apparently did, bypass the tailor shop; you cannot skip baptism and its stripping away of the old self and the re-clothing with the new self that just is Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> God wants a “wedding garment,” expects us to come dressed for the occasion, meaning with lives that reflect the one we come to worship, to celebrate, and to serve. We can't take any of this for granted. We're the recipients of amazing grace, invited to a banquet hall of the King. Like the man, we sometimes we don't even know or forget where we are in the presence of God. Where is the awe? Where is the wonder? Tom Long has this image of the scene, “The other guests humbly, quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive garments of worship and celebration, but there he is, bellying up to the punch bowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt.” In his self-absorption he's forgotten where he is. Long says it well, in strong language, but it captures what Jesus is saying, “...to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not to conform one's life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar.”

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Wells, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, October 7, 2008, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Long, 247.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin Center for Excellence in Preaching

Provisionally, this lectionary comes to us on a Sunday when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism. We will welcome Ryan Scott into the life of the church. By God's grace, Ryan Scott will grow *into* the garment wrapped around him this morning. Wearing our baptismal robe or garment is not unlike a parent who buys clothes several sizes too big for her child. In time he grows into it. That's what the Christian life is like – ever growing up into mature women and men fit and fitted for the kingdom of God. His baptism reminds us that we, too, have been baptized, which means we too have received an “altogether unmerited invitation” by Christ to be part of the church, called to live lives worthy of the God who has invited us to the feast. It's a life of serious commitment, but also the joy of a wedding feast, it requires ongoing change and transformation, of giving up the old self in order to take up a new self, new life in Christ. In some ways, our lives together and alone, are all about growing *into* women and men who are comfortable wearing the garment of Christ – a garment none of us are worthy to wear, but wear we do, by God's grace, fit and fitted for the kingdom of God.

*Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs*

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church  
Catonsville, Maryland*