

The Wedding Robe©

Matthew 22:1-14

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Okay, this is a good example of why preaching the lectionary is a good idea. There are many passages in the Bible that I would choose to preach over this one. There are passages that make us feel good; passages that might promote what I as preacher want you to hear, passages that are easy on the ears and easy to preach.

But not this one. Yes, I made the commitment to preach from Matthew this year, and it so happens that that is also what the Common Lectionary prescribes for us to follow – the Gospel of Matthew.

So, this is one of those passages that you would never hear if I had to choose what I want to preach from ... which is why following the Common Lectionary is a good idea. You hear Scripture you might never hear other wise. This is one of those things that make you go ... YIKES!!! And on the second reading it's one of those things that make you go ... Hmmm.

So let's jump right in and see what is going on in this difficult passage. We want to know two things, ... right? ... What is this text saying ... and what does it mean for us today? How is it relevant for our lives ... if it is, at all.

First of all, we have to understand that we are looking at what Jesus said through a very particular perspective. We are trying to see through the special lens of the evangelist who goes by the name of Matthew.

As I said when we first began this study of Matthew, this is most likely not the disciple Matthew, who was right there with Jesus at the time our Lord was living on earth. Most scholars believe that this author lived some years after Jesus died ... probably at least 70 some years ... because he seems to have been around at the time of the destruction of the Jewish Temple.

Matthew has a particular audience whom he is addressing ... the Jewish community, whom he is a part of ... and especially the Jewish leaders who remain closed-minded about Jesus, the Messiah.

So, if we remember that, back then, the Christian movement was small ...was the minority ... and that it was the traditional Jewish community, especially the temple leaders who resented Jesus, who ultimately had him crucified ...and if we remember that it was the Jewish people – who had been known as the Israelites – who were the Chosen People of God – then things in this passage could start making a little more sense.

This entire parable is allegory at its best.

We have the King – who is probably God – in the story.

And the King's Son – who is most likely Jesus – who is getting married. (The Bride is, of course, the Church).

We have the King's subjects – the people whom the King invites.

They are the people who are dignitaries and political people and leaders and rulers ... all those directly under the King – the chosen people, special people (we can expect that they are probably the Jewish people – especially the rulers and leaders who consider themselves the chosen people of God.)

And we have the slaves – the servants of the King – and everybody else who are kind of on the outside of the chosen circle. They would be the Gentiles, the Pagans, the non-Jewish people who are looked at with disdain. They could very well be --- sorry --- most of us.

Don't forget – we are looking at this through Matthew's eyes and understanding. His audience is the Jewish people.

But even if we put all these people in place – it's still a little bizarre, isn't it?

I mean, who would refuse an invitation to the King's banquet, given in honor of his Son? And even if they did refuse, why would they beat up and even kill the messengers who come to invite and then come back to tell you how great the meal and celebration is going to be?

But they did!

And then, in retaliation, the King has people go and kill those who killed his servants – the special people who were invited who turned down the invite! (Using allegory, scholars think this came from the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD by the Romans. Probably thinking it was God's judgment on those who would not accept the prophets of the Old Testament ... or, finally, God's Son ... Jesus of the New Testament).

And so the King says – go out and invite everyone else – all those on the outside – I don't care if they are good or bad – we are having a party and we need people to be here to celebrate!

And if that's not difficult enough to understand, Matthew ups the ante a little more.

Apparently, there was a special garment provided by the King for all those who came to the wedding – some kind of robe that was given to each to wear. Maybe it was a sign of respect or of being a special guest or a sign that the King had actually invited you. We're not sure, but it seems that way.

Yet, there was one person who made it through security without the wedding robe. Surely he was given the opportunity to wear one. I mean, every one else there had one on. But not him.

Did he think he was too good to wear it? Did he just want to be rebellious or did he really not have any respect or honor for the King?

Whatever the reason, he did not have on the wedding robe – the special garment – it was an insult – and it made the King furious. The King ordered him thrown out – out into the darkness – where there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth!” That place where you are separated from the celebration, from the joy, from the King and all the Kings party.

Seem a little extreme to you? It did to me. At first. But, the more I think about it, the more I begin to make sense of it.

Continuing with the allegory, let’s see where we are in this story. I’m pretty sure most of us are not Jewish. Some might be, but I know my flock fairly well by now and I’m not familiar with any of you who are from the Jewish tradition ... even the Christian Jewish tradition

So that would put the majority of us in the place of those who were invited later ... those who were not the initial chosen but the ones who were on the outside but who were included later. The Gentiles. The Pagans. The Non-Jews.

Please do not take this wrong. This is not an anti-Semitic sermon that turns everyone against Jews! Unfortunately, this passage has been used for that very purpose before, and it is a terrible thing to use Scripture for a reason to hate. I am convinced that was never Matthew’s intention.

So, where do we fit into this story? Do we fit? Can we relate to this at all?

Perhaps if we lived in England we might understand how meaningful it would be to have an invitation to the palace – to a royal banquet. I could not imagine turning down an invitation to a wedding banquet for the Queens grandson – for Harry – who I especially like. Who would turn down that special request? Can you imagine?

But if we are using allegory and we are wanting to see ourselves in this picture we might take a deeper look at the one who was invited in for the banquet – one who was not Jewish, considered a Gentile, one who was not the original Chosen. Yet invited. Welcomed. Shown pure hospitality and amazing grace.

We are one of them. We are those whom the Light of Christ has shown for – those whom the light shined out further than the expectations of the Jewish People – the

Chosen people of God. We are those who are invited later, but we are invited nevertheless!

Some of us are there at the banquet with humble gratitude. We are appreciative of what we have been given. We are thankful for the generosity of the King – of God. We are grateful to be a part of God’s family, recognizing our unworthiness and the amazing grace God has given us in Christ, his Son.

But, unfortunately, among all who are grateful, there are those who are there for other reasons. Maybe as a spectator, wanting to see what it’s all about. Maybe they are there just to join in for a time, but not sure of what they are committing to.

There are those who make the promises of baptism; those who pledge the covenant to serve Christ, yet perhaps their hearts are not really in it.

The saddest place in the world would be that dark place away from God – it would be a place where we would weep and grind our teeth in deep remorse.

Yes. This is a passage of judgment. It is a text through the perspective of Matthew who wanted his Jewish community to come to see that Jesus is God’s Messiah. He wanted them to believe that the temple’s destruction might have been caused by their own rebellious unbelief. He wanted them to know that others – outside the Jewish circle – are invited in, and might just have a place ... before them.

When I look closer at what the Wedding Robe might stand for in my own life of faith, I consider it to be like the garment we read of in other places in the Bible.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 30:11: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and **clothed** me with joy,”

Isaiah 61:10, says ¹⁰ “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
 my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the **garments of salvation**,
 he has covered me with the **robe of righteousness**,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Ephesians 4:24 we are told to ²⁴ ... clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Galatians 3:27 says: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Colossians 3:12: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

These are instructions for God’s people – especially given in the New Testament for those who have made a commitment to follow Christ Jesus. We are to take off the old and put on the new. We put on our robes that represent who we belong to; who we stand for; whose people we are.

Those robes are the clothes of salvation; the robes of righteousness; the clothes of kindness, compassion, humility, meekness and patience. We are changed people. We put on Christ himself.

So, when I claim to represent Jesus, yet I rebel ... I don’t act different, I don’t speak up, I don’t look different, I slip into my old ways – it’s like – I’ve graciously been invited to be the special guest of God – and I go, but refuse to change into my new robes that cover my old, rebellious behavior. It does not honor God if I don’t show my gratitude and love by wearing the wedding robe – by outwardly showing that Christ has made me a new person.

Where are you in this story? You are invited. Are you wearing the wedding robe of Christ?

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