



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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WEDDING PROTOCOL

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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, 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."

We have before us today another of those less-than-edifying texts of our scriptures that causes us to scratch our heads in disbelief at the inclusion of it in the holy cannon. Last week Joe read the story of the ten women who came to a wedding with their cell phones, but half of them had forgotten their cords to charge their batteries, and when the groom found out they couldn't get pictures of him dancing with his bride because their phones were dead, he barred them from the ceremony. It seemed rather harsh, to be sure, but this story in Matthew's gospel today tops that one in spades, as far as overreaction to a situation.

Anything can happen at a wedding. I once had a bride faint while saying her vows. Her long-sleeved dress on that hot day in a warm church finally took its toll. But a glass of water and a seat on the front pew revived her, and we finished the ceremony with her sitting rather than standing by her husband. It was a day to be lived and relived many times over the years.

Then there was the time you've heard me tell before about the bride who had the unity candles inserted into a bunch of wax flowers, and just as she's walking down the aisle, the candles ignited the flowers. She screamed half way down the aisle and pointed to this altar. I quickly grabbed them off the newly-purchased expensive paraments which were obviously not protected with glass as they are now. I assured her it was not an omen of her future life with her husband.

In another situation, the groom was in an automobile accident the night before the wedding, and ended up in traction in the hospital. So creative minds went to work late that night to provide a stand-in groom at the ceremony, which was to be preceded by the actual wedding at the hospital where patients came out of their rooms to watch the bride in all her finery walk the hospital hallway to the waiting room at the end, where vows were spoken. During the reception, a van transported guests to the hospital to congratulate the groom. Again, a wedding for the ages.

I was told about a wedding where the groom's father did not speak English well, and therefore didn't understand the priest when he said not to get out your Brownies, referring to the old cameras of days of yore, but not using the word camera, per se. I suspect many of us today wouldn't understand the priest's meaning either. The father stood up proudly to take a picture at which point the priest slammed down his Bible on the altar and yelled at the man in front of everyone.

And you've undoubtedly seen the video on YouTube of the bride kneeling at the altar in a Catholic church, about to receive communion. Her rather low-cut dress must have distracted the priest who dropped the wafer down the front of her dress, which was bad enough, but then proceeded to reach down to retrieve it because as consecrated bread, it mustn't fall. The bride slapped his hand, and then reached down to get the wafer, at which point the priest slapped her hand because she was not supposed to touch the consecrated host. Anything can happen at a wedding.

But this wedding of which Matthew speaks is a bit more gruesome. The king prepared a wedding feast for his son, sending personal invitations via his servants to their closest friends. No one RSVP'd so the king sent more servants and this time things got ugly. Not only did they outright refuse, they abused and assaulted and ultimately killed the servants. The king was so enraged at this point that he sent his army out to kill the murderers and destroy the whole city of the invited guests. Some wedding rehearsal, huh?

With this done, the king sends out more servants to invite **anyone** they can find, the good, the bad and the ugly, to be the wedding guests and enjoy the party. The wedding hall was filled to the brim with eager, hungry townsfolk.

But then we have this bizarre scene where the king severely reprimands one of the come-as-you-are guests for not being properly attired. As preposterous as it may seem, the man is then bound, hand and foot, and thrown into the outer darkness where, as it says, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And if that isn't confusing enough for a scripture text, the passage ends with a truism, the purpose of which still leaves me scratching my head: for many are called, but few are chosen.

So where to start. Certainly we must not start by taking this literally or allegorically. A parable, by definition, has a point to be made and one point only. This one makes the point at the beginning: the kingdom of heaven is like a party given by the king. But taken literally, this story in all its gory detail wouldn't be the way to win converts. Bad scholarship would use this story to bolster the perception

of a wrathful God who calls many but chooses only some, a God who condemns to hell those who are not worthy. But we are not bad scholars, so we won't go there.

In situations such as this where a passage of scripture seems less than good news, I confer with reputable scholars better able than I to get at the kernel of truth and there's no better scholar and pastor than Barbara Brown Taylor. Taylor suggests that the man was kicked out of the banquet hall, not because his clothes were unacceptable, but because his attitude wasn't right. Perhaps he was hoping that by accepting the invitation he would hold a get-out-of-jail-free card in case he got into a scrape with the king's police. "You can't arrest me; I'm a friend of the king." Perhaps he made more of the invitation than was intended, buddying up to the king as if they were long-lost relatives. It is a story where the man thought more highly of himself than he should, waltzing into the king's chamber with a chip on his shoulder, or bragging about his worthiness to be invited.

Taylor likens this situation to Sunday mornings when we come to church. We think, perhaps, that we're doing God a favor by showing up. Perhaps we think we'll be better able to barter with God in case we need a miracle, hoping she'll recognize us more readily for having seen us in church a lot. We come looking pious and put-together while harboring anger or hatred or prejudice in our mind. But, Taylor reminds us, we are no better for having been here than those who are not here. We don't get extra points for turning down Bear's tickets to come to church, though after the last few games, being in church might be more exciting. We must be careful not to break our arm patting ourselves on the back for being here when others have chosen to sleep in. There is no value system attached to being here or not being here; those of us who are here have accepted the invitation for our own good or bad reasons.

Some of us, Taylor goes on to say, have come here "with our shirttails hanging out, lining up at the buffet table as if no one could see the ways in which we, too, have refused to change, refusing to surrender our fears and resentments, refusing to share our wealth, refusing to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the old, ratty, comfortable but inappropriate clothes we prefer to the wedding attire of a more humane and generous spirit.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, "Wedding Dress," *Home By Another Way*)

Lance Pape puts a different slant on the situation presenting us with yet another way to see this crazy story. The problem with this guy who doesn't have the right clothes on is not that he is being cavalier about the situation, but is reprimanded for his failure to party. The kingdom of heaven, after all, is about the world as God would have it, the world as it would be if God were in charge, and therefore, a party to celebrate life. It's a feast, a celebration, and you have to put on your party dress, your best tie, or the nearest lampshade if that's all that you can find, and get with the program. The kingdom music is playing and it's time to get on the dance floor. It's time to have another drink, another crunchy cookie, another piece of cake. It's time to let down the proverbial hair and invite someone to join you in a waltz; it's a place to get high on joy because in spite of the place where you've come from—on the street with no special invitation to the wedding—you're here, and you're having the time of your life. For in truth, life itself is the wedding party to which we are invited if we will but clothe ourselves with a proper attitude. (www.workingpreacher.org)

Theologian Karl Barth reiterates this point by commenting that "in the last resort it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that those who do not obey and come accordingly—that is festively—declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to accept the invitation and appear at all.

Is church the kingdom of God? No, but it serves as the dress rehearsal, perhaps. Here we gather at God's—and one another's—invitation, as we are, with all of our baggage, wearing our ratty emotional garb, to rehearse our joy at the wedding feast when God is the host. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says at the beginning of the parable, is like a king who threw a party. And that's the point, the sole point, of the parable. So come, join in, invite everyone you know to celebrate life day in and day out. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life and love, we come today with appreciations we don't express often enough for the beauty of this world, the friendships that sustain us, the presence of your spirit and the joy of life in all of its abundance.

At the same time, we are here with yearnings that we cannot fully identify, fears too personal to voice out loud, hostilities of which we are ashamed and anger that so easily besets us. We are often too boastful of the small accomplishments that call attention to ourselves even while we are weighed down with guilt for having done so little with so much. Yet with all of this mixed baggage we are bold to enter your presence, God of the Universe, to pray for ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves.

There is great need in our world today. The political scene has become embarrassingly divisive, the chasm between the haves and the have-nots grows ever larger, disasters have taken enormous tolls and illness ravages our bodies as well as our society. Give us the courage to live faithfully in your love, empowered in your hope and be rooted in your peace that we will not succumb to the temptation to give in to their seduction.

Today we pray for those who are especially in need of your presence. For those we have mentioned and those we have named in our own minds who are in the hospital, or facing life-threatening illnesses, those recuperating and those celebrating their new-found health, we pray. For those who are in institutions of nursing homes, prison, mental hospitals,

Shape your grace around our inmost needs, God of life. Let us not fall victim to ourselves and our fears. In times of universal sadness and global uncertainty, give us courage to reach out in understanding and in deeds of kindness to others. May this be a time of spiritual renewal and an opportunity to invest in the things that will promote peace and love among the peoples of the world. In the name of the One who is Peace, Amen.

--Gary L. McCann