



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

RISING TO THE OCCASION

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*Matthew 22.1-14*

*Jesus spoke again in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said: 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. Everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet. But they paid no attention and went away—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged.*

*Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and 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 wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.*

*Then the king told his attendants, 'Tie this man hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen.*

*Bhagavad-Gita 12.13-14*

*He who lets go of hatred,  
who treats all beings with kindness  
and compassion, who is always serene,  
unmoved by pain or pleasure,*

*free of the "I" and "mine,"  
self-controlled, firm and patient,  
his whole mind focused on me —  
that man is the one I love best.*

*(translated by Stephen Mitchell)*

Anything can happen at a wedding. Ask anyone who has officiated at weddings and you'll hear stories that will make you laugh and cry at the same time. They confirm the notion that truth is stranger than fiction. I remember one of the very first weddings I performed when I was a young and quite inexperienced clergyman. The bride fainted just as she began to speak her vow; she simply stopped talking and fell right on top of me. It wasn't that she had cold feet but a rather bad combination of nerves, a warm day and a long-sleeved dress.

One of the first weddings I had here at New England Church was for a couple not from the church who were working on a shoestring budget. They had asked to use some plastic flowers we had in the backroom for the altar, which seemed like a reasonable request until the bride screamed coming down the aisle that the altar was on fire. Sure enough, I turned around to find the plastic flowers, into which the unity candles had been poorly inserted, in flames on top of the new and expensive paraments we had just purchased. I grabbed the flowers, blew them out, and after everyone caught their collective breath, we went on. The bride was in tears, asking me at the altar if this portended bad things to come. Needless to say, we banned plastic flowers with candles at weddings and bought a glass top to protect the paraments.

On another occasion the groom had developed the stomach flu the morning of the wedding and had vomited for hours. We went through with the ceremony without mishap while the wedding couple sat in chairs, his face as white as her dress. Needless to say, there was no kiss after the pronouncement and the honeymoon was delayed a few days.

Even more dramatic was the wedding in which the groom had been in an automobile accident the day before, ending up in the hospital with a body cast and in traction. A middle-aged man who had wooed his bride for many years without success, kept saying in the emergency room "I have to marry this woman. I have to get out of here by tomorrow." Needless to say, he didn't get out, but the bride came to him, so the bride walked down the long aisle of the hospital wing to the sunroom, much to the delight of the groom, his legs and arms covered in white and dangling from the contraption above his bed that held them in place as well as the patients in the rooms along the corridor who stood by their doors as so many bridal attendants to applaud the couple. The "wedding" took place in the prescribed place with a stand-in groom followed by groups of wedding guests making short visits to the hospital to congratulate the groom.

Matthew tells us about a wedding where things went awry. The invited guests had excuses for not coming, so the king told his servants to go out on the street and invite everyone to the wedding so the banquet hall would be filled. Even so, one of the guests who came in off the street wasn't properly attired and so was tied up and thrown out in the darkness.

It is a curious story, to say the least, and one that doesn't make much sense if one takes it literally. Who would expect an invitation to a come-as-you-are wedding, where someone was beckoned in off the street, only to find the father of the groom humiliate him and kick him out of church for not having a suit on? As you might guess, there's something else going on here, either something we don't understand in that culture of wedding protocol, or there's another purpose to the story. Since I can't speak to the former, and am expected when I stand in the pulpit to expound on the latter, I will choose to attempt some meaning in this rather strange story.

It would seem, according to some theologians, that the underdressed guest was kicked out not because of his clothes but because he didn't rise to the occasion. Perhaps he made more of his privilege in being at the banquet than was appropriate, thinking HE was doing the king a favor by coming to the banquet when those who were invited didn't come, rather than the king doing HIM a favor by including him. Perhaps he acted as though his invitation to the banquet provided him with bragging rights, name-dropping when it would serve him well, hedge his bets down the road if he ever had a run-in with the king's law keepers, or that by obliging the king with his presence, the king was obligated to HIM for some favor in future. For whatever reason, this man didn't measure up to what the king expected from anyone coming to the feast. It isn't about the clothes the man was wearing or not wearing but about his attitude and his penchant for thinking more highly of himself than he ought.

If that seems a bit far-fetched, examine our motives for coming to church on Sunday. Perhaps some come thinking they're doing God a favor. Sometimes we think that by honoring God with our faithful attendance we are somehow immune to mishap or tragedy, that somehow we have the Almighty's special protection. We must be careful not to break our arm patting ourselves on the back, though. Remember that when the second round of guests was invited to the feast, the king's emissaries gathered the good, the bad and the ugly into the banquet hall. Sometimes our attitude of superiority betrays our supposed values of equality, for we are not any better than those who didn't come today. Some of them responded to invitations to visit the pumpkin patch with their family, some received an invitation in a dream to sleep in, and some responded to the beckoning call of nature's autumnal voice. It's not that we're any better than any one else, it's just that this is the invitation we happened to accept for our own good or bad reasons.

The wedding feast to which the world has been invited is the reign of God, where peace wins the day and equality is the banner under which we gather; where swords are fashioned into medals of honor and guns are used only for clay pigeons, not war; where everyone is valued as part of the feast and no one is left out except by their own unwillingness to accept the invitation or be clothed in the right attitude. This is the wedding feast to which we've been invited.

The community of faith may not be the heavenly marriage feast but it is the rehearsal dinner where each of us gets to practice our part for the big day. Some of us have come here for the rehearsal dinner without having thought much about what we're doing here. And as one commentator put it "we have shown up 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 resentment, refusing to share our wealth, refusing to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the old clothes we wear to the king's banquet, the ratty, old comfortable clothes we prefer to the wedding attire that is expected of those of us who are here to rehearse our parts week after week.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, 'Wedding Dress,' *Home by Another Way*)

But God doesn't want just warm bodies. And frankly the church can't survive with just warm bodies. Warm bodies only want to be taken care of; warm bodies just want to make an appearance and then get back in our comfortable jeans of selfish living. God and churches need people who will rise to the occasion, who see that wearing the holy garments of giving and sharing is a privilege. To help establish the world God wants means we can't just show up to put in our time; we can't just phone it in; we must come to help out, to reach out, to do our part.

We can't have a Sunday School to teach our children about peace without teachers who show them what it means to be peaceful people; we can't have a caring church without people to make phone calls and personal visits to show we care; we can't be a thinking church without people who prepare to be here and think about what is said and done and challenge it and argue with it and do their part to make it as good as it can be. We can't receive communion without volunteers to prepare, serve and share these; we can't offer a funeral luncheon without people to help serve it. We can't have a chancel choir or a bell choir without people who will come week after week to practice and perform. We can't be the Body of Christ unless we practice being the Body of Christ among ourselves. We can't be models of unconditional love and justice if we don't practice it here.

We must rise to the occasion. We must wear the appropriate attitudes and act out the role we've been gifted to play in the story by showing up ready to rehearse, ready to learn our lines and practice our parts regularly.

God is not looking for people just to fill in the places so it looks good. God is looking for wedding guests who will rise to the occasion, who will don the clothes of justice and love, of joy and peace. It isn't about the denim or silk on our backs that counts. The clothes we wear as people of faith are made from the fabric of our whole lives, made from holy patterns of love and grace sewn together with forgiveness and kindness. When we wear these we are absolutely gorgeous and wonderfully attired for the feast of life. By practicing here, week after week, by giving and sharing as an exercise to keep our spirits in excellent health, we are ready to share with those in need when the time comes to facilitate the wedding of their needs and God's abundance. Why would we want to wear anything else, especially if we want to be ready for a wedding whenever the invitation comes? (Barbara Brown Taylor)

—Gary L. McCann

(Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for her insights into this parable as found in her sermon 'Wedding Dress.')

## 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 University, to pray for ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves.

There is great need in our world today. Politics has become 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.

On this Veterans Day weekend, we are mindful of those who have sacrificed for the well-being and freedom of others. We are reminded by the emotionally moving Moving Wall that all have given some; some have given all. Even as we give our heartfelt thanks to those who have given, may we be ever diligent in seeking peace instead of war. And our hearts go out to the victims of the typhoon in the Philippines. In their devastation and loss, hold them in everlasting arms.

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.