

I missed being with you last weekend because I was officiating the wedding of one of my former students from when I was campus chaplain at WVU. The ceremony and reception were held in the Parkersburg Arts Center, so we were surrounded by beautiful and unique paintings, sculpture, and photographs. What was also beautiful and unique was the bride's gown, which was not traditional white, but a lovely shade of silvery pale green. In the same way that etiquette dictates no wearing white to other people's weddings, assuming that the bride typically wears white, the invitation for this wedding specified formal attire, no sage green. It occurred to me that it's been awhile since I've seen an invitation that requested a particular dress code, let alone a color, and I was grateful for the instruction. I'm involved in a more than average number of weddings, and I've seen everything from jeans to \$10,000 ball gowns—and that's just the brides. They all have been perfect for the style of wedding they wanted, but with so much variety, I always worry about being over or under dressed—not so much for the ceremony, where I can usually just wear my uniform, but if I'm invited to the reception afterwards. It always helps to know what that host expects. Matthew's rogue wedding guest would have benefited from either a more specific invitation or from a dose of my anxiety about appropriate attire; who wants to be tied up thrown out of a party?

This is a tough text, but this is also a tough chapter in Jesus' life; in the narrative time line, we're in Holy Week, just before the establishment succeeds in their plot against Jesus, and the crowds, who once paved his way with palm branches, turn on him to cheer for his public execution. The language of kings and kingdoms may jar our modern sensibilities, but in Jesus' context, that was the most familiar way of speaking about God and the vision God has for human society. We can't always draw easy allegories from Jesus' parables, but equating God with the king and Jesus with the son is not much of a stretch in this story. The imagery of the wedding banquet recurs all throughout scripture, from Isaiah's feast of rich foods and well-aged wines, to the table the prepared by the Lord in Psalm 23, to the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation. The relationship between God and humanity and the intended relationship among human beings of all nations and backgrounds is best portrayed as a king preparing a feast where all people are welcome and everyone sits down together to enjoy God's abundance. That's what God wants; history has shown us over and over, that's not what humanity wants.

In the story, the king first invites the guests we might expect to be at a royal wedding: people with wealth, status, and power—at least one who owns property, one who owns a business, and one who thinks he can abuse the slaves. We might think of this first group as the insiders or the “A” list. At first they simply don't come; so he persists with a second invitation, which they either ignore or answer with violence against the messengers. The king responds by destroying the people who committed murder and burning their city. Keep in mind that the gospel was written *after* Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and Matthew's community may have understood that defeat as the consequence of Jesus' contemporaries rejecting and

conspiring against God's Son as happens in this story. Having received none of the guests he initially invited, the king does not cancel the banquet; he sends his slaves to invite everyone they find to the wedding, and the hall is filled with guests, both good and bad.

Now, if the slaves have pulled people off the streets to come to this banquet, there's a good chance that these B-list guests don't have the same resources that the A-list invitees had. In a world where people were struggling for daily bread, who keeps a spare wedding robe in the closet? But here's where some historical context helps: it was customary for the host to provide the wedding robes for their guests. So again, the king has offered every necessary thing for the guests to enjoy what probably would have been a week of joyous festivities, but the people keep rejecting him—rejecting the invitation entirely, or attending the party but rejecting the gifts the king tries to give. The improperly dressed man has no explanation for why he didn't put on a wedding robe, so the king has his attendants throw him out of the party. Many are invited, but only a few end up taking part in the fullness of the feast.

Again, this is not an easy parable. We like the part where the king throws a feast, where he invites people and keeps showing them all the reasons to attend. We may not like to see ourselves in that group that politely or not-so-politely declines; so if we find another demographic to assign to that role, then we like the part where the king makes a broader invitation. The idea that God welcomes all people is pretty central to our world view—God so loved *the world*, including us. But what do we do with the guest who gets kicked out because he won't put on a robe?

All throughout Matthew's gospel, we see a concern about insiders and outsiders, those who are already established and newcomers, people who we would expect to recognize, welcome, and celebrate Jesus as the Son of God and the people who actually do that—and how those are often not the same people. From the magi, to tax collectors, to Canaanite mothers, to Roman centurions, Matthew keeps showing us how the kingdom of God grows more and more inclusive of those who wouldn't have made the A-list. God welcomes all people to participate in kingdom living—but participation is more than just showing up; living into the kingdom means following Jesus' teaching and example, which is to say, living a life of humility, kindness, merciful justice, and selfless service. So it's not exactly earth-shattering news that some people choose not to attend, or, show up but then reject the expectations of discipleship. If we don't want to live lives of humble, selfless, charitable, merciful service of others, that's OK, but then we shouldn't claim to follow the Lord who did just that. And whereas our own self-reflection can be a little fuzzy, and we tend to think we have a much clearer view of how *other* people are living up to Jesus' expectations, this, and many other parables, remind us that it is God who gets to be the bouncer, not us.

We have an invitation to kingdom living: he has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you—but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. May we RSVP with joy and allow God to clothe us with righteousness, all of our days.