



“Appropriate Attire Required”

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Matthew 22:1-14

A first-grade teacher gave her students an assignment. She told them that the next day they were to bring in a symbol of their religion. So, the next morning, she called on Isaac, who stood up and said, "I am Jewish and this Star of David is the symbol of my religion." The teacher then called upon Mary, who stood up saying, "I am Catholic and this Rosary is a symbol of my religion." Next came Bobby. "I am Baptist," he said, and held up a casserole dish.

Have you ever noticed how often food and drink are mentioned in the New Testament? And banquets and weddings? Eating with outcasts and the outsiders? Jesus indeed valued the relationships created by dining with people. Jesus attended parties, he ate with everyone, the sinners and saints alike. Even Jesus's first miracle, the moment when he revealed his divine nature, was at a wedding in Cana. Food, parties, and weddings were important to Jesus. And food is also a theme that is important throughout the Bible. The banqueting table symbolizes the place where all of God's children are invited and everyone eats their fill. It is the place of both brokenness and blessing. It is the place where Jesus was betrayed and where his feet were washed with expensive oil and loving tears. It is a table open to all and there is no "Members Only" emblem. There is no sign above the lunch counter saying appropriate attire required, or correct skin color required, or minimum bank account amount, or the right language spoken, or a proper identity card, or suitable religious beliefs, or a clean medical chart or psychiatric evaluation. The invitation is given to all. We are all invited to the reception. Our names are on the guest list. Everybody here is chosen and everyone is welcome.

But the parable Jesus tells in this morning's Gospel lesson is very strange. It is strange because the story seems to jump all over the place, doesn't it? The king was nice, then the king was a killer. The king was generous, then the king was mean. We see that the guests were invited, but they made excuses about being too busy or preoccupied to attend. Then the guests became tired of the king's messengers and decided to kill them, and the mad king ransacked their towns in anger and revenge. And finally, the king swung open the doors of the kingdom so that all people could celebrate, dance, and eat. And that, folks, would've been a good ending. Couldn't we have just stopped there? Yet, the story isn't done. One lowly guest wasn't wearing the appropriate attire, he wasn't dressed quite right, he didn't fit in, he didn't follow the rules, and he was thrown out into the darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This parable has a great beginning with a joyous wedding feast, an inclusive reception, a banquet fit for a king where everyone is invited and welcomed to the festive party. Yet, there are also sinister actions and hurtful words. And it finally concludes with a tragic and catastrophic ending. So, in this disjointed and depressing text, what portion of this parable has something to teach us? What can we learn from this messy and fragmented story? As I tend to do, I try to scan the text

for the voices that aren't heard or for the characters that are obscured. In this parable, I am drawn to the unfortunate wedding guest, the one without proper attire. And I am drawn to him because in all of my research, hardly any commentators give him attention. When the preachers and commentators I studied finally attended to this marginalized fellow, like we often do with people different than us, they gave him a wide berth. Even the Gospel of Luke, in relating this same parable, doesn't even mention him at all, passing over him in silence.

I am further drawn to this poorly dressed outcast because I sympathize with him. I remember being asked to preach a wedding in Atlanta a couple of years ago, confident in my normal, bland, gray suit that I usually wear. But a few days before the ceremony, I decided to glance at the invitation again. Oops! It was a black-tie wedding (not the optional kind) and I didn't have a tuxedo. Amanda and I buzzed all over town looking for the right tux, trying on many options, only to finally put a rush order on a tuxedo from Men's Wearhouse two days before the big event. I get it. I lived it. I know how difficult it can be to wear the proper attire for a fancy wedding. So, how was this hapless wedding guest in this first century parable for today supposed to get a garment on such short notice? I don't know, but I'm pretty sure Men's Wearhouse wasn't an option back then. Regardless of the challenges, commentators don't seem to cut this man any slack.

Without fail those few biblical commentators who actually tried to attend to this expelled wedding guest's story seemed simply to rush to judgment, calling him a disrespectful and bad mannered guy who insisted on wearing his filthy rags to a fancy event. In fact, many speculate he was a vagrant who climbed in by a window or snuck in an unattended entrance. Still, another theory is that he was a rude rebel who arrogantly refused the king's gift of appropriate wedding garments. It is thought that kings and wealthy leaders in the Ancient Near East provided wedding garments for their guests which, in this situation, the man refused to wear. The speculation that free wedding garments were given to all the guests, however, is not only far-fetched but I don't see any proof in history or in this text that all of the invited people were given wedding clothes and that this particular guest refused. In fact, the parable says nothing about this man, good or bad, other than that he failed to wear the appropriate wedding attire. Perhaps he wasn't aware of the dress code. Perhaps he was too poor to buy a new suit. Perhaps he was a recent immigrant who wore the only clothes he had with him. Perhaps he simply cared more about the gift of joy and enthusiasm rather than what he looked like. Whatever the unwanted guest's situation, he has been condemned to bad press by current biblical commentators, just as he was denounced and expelled by the king at the banquet.

That's why my heart goes out to this unfortunate wedding guest. He was the typical outsider. He didn't follow the rules of the day. He didn't fit in. And as I kept digging deeper into this inclusive banquet with a mad king as host, and as I kept looking at this wedding guest, I wondered how this could possibly happen. How could he be banished from the banquet? And I became aware that this exclusion took place because something was missing in this parable. Or, more accurately, someone was missing. The one for whom the party was being thrown, the king's son! For you see, the guests gathered, the house was full, and the king had made his grand entrance. But there was no sign of the son. And I don't blame the son for being absent. How could the son enjoy the wedding feast when there was one guest not present... when there was

one guest cast out... when there was one lost lamb when the other ninety-nine were safely housed and fed.

And if we believe that the king in this story is God, as most scholars do, then the son is Jesus. And so, I believe, Jesus is not at the party because he is out there, in the darkness, looking for the one who was abandoned and betrayed. He is out there, in the darkness, with all of us who feel naked, exposed, and afraid. He is out there, in the darkness, with all of us who have felt the stabbing pain of discrimination, of embarrassment, of being made a spectacle. He is out there, in the darkness, with all of us who are gossiped about, laughed at, and scorned, all of us who are shunned, uninvited, unwelcome, unappreciated, and unwanted. Jesus is with us, out there, in the darkness... beckoning us to his table.

In his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, that wonderfully creative sociologist and author, Tony Campolo tells the story of traveling to Honolulu, Hawaii, for a speaking engagement. He flew all the way from Pennsylvania to Hawaii and had an awful case of jet lag. So, at 3:00 AM, he was wide awake. Campolo found a donut shop near his hotel and as he sat there, sipping coffee and glancing at a newspaper, the door to the diner swung open and in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes. Their talk was loud and crude. Campolo was just about to make his getaway when he overheard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be thirty-nine." One of her friends responded in a sarcastic and rude tone, "So, what do you want from me, a birthday party?" "No," she said. "I've never had a birthday party in my life. Too late to start now." Suddenly, Campolo had an idea. As soon as the women had left, he said to Harry, the owner of the diner, "Do those women come in here every night?" "Yep," he said, "about this same time. Hope they weren't bothering you." "No," Campolo said, "but I have an idea. The lady who was sitting next to me is going to have a birthday tomorrow. I'll pay the bill if we can have a little birthday party for her."

A smile spread across Harry's face. "That's a good idea. Her name is Agnes." He called his wife out of the kitchen area and told her about it. They agreed to bake the cake. The next morning by 2:30 AM Campolo had decorated the diner with crepe paper and had made a big sign reading, "Happy Birthday, Agnes." Word had gotten around somehow because by 3:15 AM every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. Wall to wall working women and Tony Campolo. At 3:30 AM on the dot, Agnes walked in and encountered the cake with burning candles and the crowd singing loudly, "Happy Birthday." She was flabbergasted, stunned, shaken. Her eyes moistened. Then after she blew out the candles she completely lost it and openly cried.

After the party was over, Campolo asked the group if he could say a prayer. He prayed for Agnes and everyone else in the diner. Then after everyone was gone, he thanked Harry for going along with the party. Harry said, "Hey, you didn't tell me you were a preacher. What church do you belong to?" And, in one of those moments when just the right words came, Campolo answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:00 AM."

That's the kind of church that Jesus came to create. His first miracle took place in the festive atmosphere of a wedding party. And throughout his ministry, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other notorious sinners loved to be around him. While the solemnly pious didn't want to attend his parties or sit at his table, those who were lonely, the outcast, and the down and outs who

didn't usually get invited followed him with great excitement. And in the end, I don't think God is like the mad king. I don't think God banishes anyone from the banquet. I don't think God would give up welcoming, loving, and inviting until the dining room was full, even overflowing, perhaps embarrassingly so, uncomfortably so. And it wouldn't matter who was there at three in the morning, the preacher or the prostitute. Everyone would be loved. Everyone would be invited. Everyone would be welcomed regardless of how their life was clothed.

And so, in today's world, we might feel as if we are at a party where the mad king is telling us, "many are called but few are chosen." We might feel like the tennis shoes at a black-tie wedding. We might feel as if society is telling us that appropriate attire is required and that we're not "dressed" suitably, that we don't fit in, that we are different, that we are not like everyone else, that we are going to be kicked out and left out and put out. This story also reminds us that often we judge people by outward appearances. That we judge people by how much money they have. That we judge people by what country they are from, what language they speak, and religion they practice. But in the strange kin-dom of God that Jesus envisioned and proclaimed, there is no dress code. In this strange kin-dom, everyone is welcome at the table. In this strange kin-dom, God's love reaches everybody. In this strange kin-dom, everyone is accepted. In this strange kin-dom, "all are called and all are chosen." Everyone is invited, all are wanted, and you can come to the party just as you are. Welcome to the table.

Amen.