

October 15, 2017 Welcome One and All to the Party, Depart with your Christ Shirt On Matthew 22:1-14

Perhaps you have heard of the family that moved into the neighbourhood and the little country church decided to reach out to this new family. When the two church visitors arrived at the doorstep they were surprised to find that the family had 7 children and it became obvious that they were in need of some assistance. The people of the church invited the family to their church service and said goodbye. Later in the week a small group in the church responded to their need. They delivered a package to the family and said, "We want you to know that you and your entire family are welcome at our church anytime. We have bought you these gifts and we want you to feel comfortable and at ease in our congregation. We hope that you can use this clothing," and they left. The family opened the package to find 9 suits of clothing, beautiful clothes for every member of the family. Sunday came and the congregation anticipated the family coming in the door at any moment. The family never showed. Wondering what could possibly have happened, after lunch some members of the church returned to the home and found the family just getting back, all dressed in their new clothes.

"We don't mean to be nosy but we wondered what happened. We had hoped to see you this morning in church." The father responded. He said, "Well, we got up this morning intending to come. And we sure do appreciate your invitation. But after we got all cleaned up and dressed, why we look so proper we went to the Anglican Church service instead."

Well, that story is a little dated. But maybe there is something in it for us. Maybe you think you have given enough invitations to church in your day. You worked up the courage to broach the subject. You went out of your way to be hospitable and then people just let you down anyway. You've become a bit jaded and you have accepted that that is just the way it is.

Today we have this rather harsh reading from the gospel of Matthew. We are told that Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and the chief priests in a parable. He said the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who was giving a wedding banquet for his son. The reception that was given was immense. You've all been to wedding receptions and you know how they can get out of hand. Imagine one thrown by a king for his son. Invitations are sent to all the friends of the family but they all turn down the invitation, they are too busy to attend.

The king then invites everyone out on the streets and in the marketplaces. The dining hall is filled with guests but there is a problem. It just so happens that as the king is mixing with the guests, he sees a man who is not wearing the appropriate wedding attire. He is wearing an old, perhaps tattered robe, obviously the same clothing that he wore in everyday life, his street clothes. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe," the king asks. The man was speechless, so the king had him bound and tossed into a place called outer darkness. Jesus concludes the parable with these solemn words: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Wow, how nasty is that. That is an ugly parable.

Now, I did find it helpful to delve in to the history and context of this passage. First of all its placement in the whole Matthew story. The tension against Jesus is really 'ramping up'. This part of the story comes after the Palm Sunday, triumphant entry in to Jerusalem piece. Jesus has already had a few very tense debates with the Pharisees and the Sadducees who are now beginning to plot a trap to keep him quiet and stop disrupting the status quo. Jesus has already predicted his death to the disciples twice. He has been transfigured on the hilltop before his two closest followers. And right after this passage, Jesus gets in to that debate with the Pharisees about paying taxes to Caesar.

So, that's where it fits in the story. What about wedding garments of the day. Ordinary people had two changes of clothing: your regular, everyday work clothes; and a festive garment, a wedding robe--- something usually white, that you kept clean and unwrinkled. And most people owned nothing else in clothing.

Now wedding were a community affair. When the messengers came to invite you to a wedding, or you heard that bell ring, you would pen up your sheep, drop your weaving; run home and put on your wedding garment (the white one) and everybody would go to the party. And these were festive

gatherings that went on for days. We can imagine the same kind of celebration as when the Prodigal Son returned: roasted fatted calf, music, merriment, giving of gifts, and lots of wine. The party would go on and on until you slaughtered your last calf and drank the last of the wine.

We presume the man at the banquet the king threw for his son and bride knew the standards and routines—at least regarding the wedding garment. So, yes, this parable is extremely harsh, someone is thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for wearing the wrong clothes. Could the man have been caught unawares, not near his trusty clothes hook of white clothing?

Or is this about not preparing yourself and not reflecting who you say you are?

There is the first group, who simply decline the invitation. And then there is the guy without the wedding robe, who refused to prepare himself, to participate completely.

If you were the king, you would feel snubbed and insulted by these people, right? If you had influence and power, you might send those folks who offended you to some nasty place. Or at least, you'd be tempted to. I'll certainly admit it. When someone offends me, my first thoughts maybe to retaliate. Then the filter goes up and I think before I speak or act.

This is actually a parable, an analogy of the Kingdom of Heaven, a story of the way God acts in the world. God has invited us to be partners in the building up of that kingdom, on earth as in heaven. We are invited to the greatest feast ever imagined. And how many of us fully participate all of the time? It is not always easy is it? Sometimes people let us down. Sometimes we hear about scandals that charity directors get involved in. I don't know about you, but I find that I have to be motivated from time to time, to rethink what is possible.

You may have heard of Tony Campolo, a Christian sociologist, a minister, an author and an advisor to some of the former presidents of the US. A few years ago Tony travelled to Honolulu, Hawaii, for a speaking engagement. He flew all the way from Pennsylvania to Hawaii and was experiencing jet lag. He had trouble keeping awake during the daylight and was up late in to the night. One night at 3:00 am he found a donut shop near his hotel. 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. Tony was just about to make his getaway when he overheard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." One of her friends responded in a sarcastic 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, Tony 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," Tony said, "but I have an idea. The one 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 great idea. Her name is Agnes." Harry called his wife out of the kitchen area and told her about it. They agreed to bake the cake. The next morning by 3:00 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 3:00 am every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. Wall to wall prostitutes and Tony Campolo. At 3:30 am on the dot, Agnes walked in and confronted 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, Tony asked the group if he could say a prayer. He prayed for Agnes and everyone else in the group. 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?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony 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. Prostitutes and other notorious sinners loved to be around him. And while the solemnly pious could not relate to what He was about, those lonely rejects who didn't usually get invited to parties took to Him with excitement.

So why the confrontation at the end of Jesus' parable? The King said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? And he was speechless! He could have said, "my dear King I am sorry I didn't dress appropriately because time ran out and ...I just came from binding up the wounds of a beggar who happened by my shop, I just came from visiting my neighbor who was wrongly convicted and is in prison, I just gave my garment to my servant Joshua who didn't have one so he could come through the door of your fine palace and join this party, I just prepared a meal for the child up the street who had no food throughout this whole day and I couldn't see him go to bed hungry. I think any of these responses would have had the king bring out a replacement white garment for the man who would have been honoured at the king's table.

For us this parable which can appear cruel, is about the countless invitations of God that come into our lives---to seek God, to include God in our lives, to have our lives transformed, to make spaces for God in the midst of our never-ending busyness, to resist the very strong elements in our culture that would push God to the margins of life or eliminate God from our minds altogether. These invitations come all of the time in many different ways, disguised in everyday life. Come, take in the party and leave with your Christ shirt on. Let the outward effects of God's grace upon your heart be known through your actions. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." (Colossians 3:16) Amen.

Acknowledging inspiration from

Blair, Brett [The King's Reception \(What Are You Wearing to the Wedding?\)](#), ChristianGlobe Network
Bates, Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates, [Dress codes or radical welcome](#), episcopaldigitalnetwork
Campolo, Tony [The Kingdom of God is a Party](#)