

# “Dressed Fit for a King”

Matthew 22:1-14

August 15, 2010

*“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and the king said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And the man was speechless.”*

Matt. 22:11-12

Friends the Christian life is sit-down dinner – so dress appropriately!

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**The invitation** could have been gold-embossed and hand delivered, or it could have been in the form of a personal phone call from the Queen’s secretary. The manner of it is not important. It was the invitation itself that was significant; the kind of invitation that you and I only dream about -- too farfetched to ever become a reality.

But for one particular British film star it was very real. Several years ago **Helen Mirren** received just such an invitation direct from Buckingham Palace to join her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at a private dinner. Mirren had recently received an Oscar for her portrayal of Her Majesty in the movie “The Queen.”

In accepting the award for Best Actress she saluted the real Queen by saying: *“Queen Elizabeth has weathered many, many storms. And I salute her courage and her consistency and I thank her because if it wasn't for her I most certainly would not be here.”*

The Queen wished to have a private dinner with Mirren. And even though the Queen’s social calendar is etched in stone one year in advance, Queen Elizabeth directed her private secretary to ‘make room’ for a special dinner with the actress.

And Mirren’s reply? *“The Palace very kindly extended an invitation to dinner last Tuesday, May 1. But, unfortunately I am filming in South Dakota and unable to change my schedule. I am very sad not to be able to attend.”* She was too busy to take time out for Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

An unnamed palace official reportedly said, *“It is unheard of for Her Majesty to extend a personal invitation to dinner to someone who has portrayed her in a film. We did not expect to be told that the date is unacceptable.”* The Queen, we assume, was not amused.

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**Though we might get a good laugh out of a story like that, today’s parable from Matthew is no laughing matter.** This story is serious. It’s a striking and troubling story in which all of the guests, invited months ahead to a wedding party thrown by a king, beg off at the last minute. Furious, he responds violently and opens the banquet hall to all who wish to enter. *“Invite everyone,”* he proclaims, *“I don’t care who they are!”*

Though biblical scholars believe the most original version of this parable is found in the fourteenth chapter of Luke, Matthew's version of it is the one we most vividly remember. It's designed to be remembered. And it's clearly and intentionally an allegory.

New Testament scholar **Eugene Boring**, writing in the New Interpreter's Bible says, "*Matthew makes the parable an allegory of salvation history - from the initial invitation and the sending of the prophets to Israel, through the renewed invitation the result of missionary efforts of the early church, and finally concluding, as is Matthew's style, at the last judgment when the good and bad will be sorted out.*" (417)

**The details are almost self-explanatory.** It was traditional in Jesus' day that invitations be sent well in advance of a banquet, and that an invitation was were to be acknowledged and responded to by those invited. *Repondez sil vous plait* -- reply, if you please.

It was also traditional in those days to follow-up the invitation and acceptance with a courtesy reminder. **In short, those who threw a banquet went a long, long way in extending hospitality, and anyone not able to attend was obligated to advise the host well in advance.** Yet as Jesus tells it, and as the early church interpreted it, all of the guests begged off. Other things to do of greater importance, they were saying. As with several of Jesus' previous parables in Matthew the motif of rejection is front and center; not only that it's repeated twice in the story when some of those invited seize and kill the king's messengers. It's at this point the parable moves beyond credibility – destroying the whole city and killings its inhabitants.

A bit harsh don't you think; a story tellers hyperbole, created for a purpose – for shock value. Listen up people!

Those who received the initial invitations and who rejected the king's invitation were destroyed by the power of the king. And those who had no hope of being invited were asked to come on in. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal, Israel chose to exclude itself from the banquet. So the invitation is offered to *hoi polloi*, to the people on the street – everyone – the good and the bad. No criterion given, citizen or alien, rich or poor, religious or secular, Jew or Gentile.

If the parable were to stop here, as it does in Luke's gospel we could leave worship today feeling pretty good about ourselves. For we have come to see ourselves as those whom God has invited to the banquet after Israel chose not to come to the party. But Matthew isn't Luke. In fact he turns the allegory toward the church by adding a second scene, one not found in Luke, and lays it right in our lap and says, **"OK Fourth Presbyterian Church, what do you say about this?"**

When the king entered the fellowship hall and looked around, his eyes fall upon someone who wasn't properly dressed. And he said, '*Friend how dare you come in here looking like that!*' The guest was speechless.

*“Get the rascal out of here – fast. And make sure that he doesn’t get back in.”*

**Eugene Peterson** paraphrases the king, *“That’s what I mean, when I say, ‘Many get invited; but only a few make it.’*

**There is something blatantly unfair going on here. It’s a feeling we’ve had with a number of parables this summer.** Why should a guest, invited at the last minute, be expected to be decked out in white tie and tails, or gowned by Dior? Every one of these folks were invited with little time to prepare. Something’s not right here – the conclusion of this story is an affront any sense of fairness. And if the King represents God, as Matthew wants us to understand, is this the way a grace-filled, loving, forgiving God acts?

We’ve been taught better ... and by no less a teacher than the Master himself. It’s not a just response. Why, it doesn’t even fit with storyline. We’d never treat someone like that. As disciples of Jesus Christ we may not sell all that we have and give the proceeds to the poor, but we would never behave like that.

**Those, however, are the responses that come from reading Matthew through Luke’s eyes.** And when we do, we miss the power of the parable as Matthew intends it for his community. You see, Matthew’s purpose in this parable is directed, not to Israel as one might presume, but to the church. To you and me. Our place at the banquet table at the **Wedding Feast of the Lamb** has nothing to do with the order of invitation, or even of hospitality, or even with the cut of shirt on your back, or lack of it, it has to do with whether we are wearing the clothing of an authentic Christian life.

It’s as simple as this: When confronted by the King, the guest not properly dressed is without excuse, because a follower of Christ should know better.

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**If allegory is Matthew’s literary medium in communicating his message, then metaphor is the vehicle that carries it, for “proper attire” to Matthew is the garment of the Christian life**

*“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”* writes Paul to the Church in Galatia (3:27). *“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,”* he writes to the Colossians, *“clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”* (3:12-14).

This morning we participated in the baptism of **Avery Kevin Moore**. In his baptism, through the faith of the church and of his parents, this child has put on Christ. At his confirmation he will take on the identity that has been held in trust for him – by this community of faith. From

that point on, as for all of us, the measure of our faith is intrinsically woven into the garment we wear into the world.

Last Sunday Pastor Bruce likened the task ahead of Fourth Presbyterian Church during this interim period to that of a performance – a presentation that you are fully capable of performing, because you know the script; you know the choreography, for you have been coached for generations by gifted servants of the Word. The dress rehearsal and the fittings are behind us. We are in full costume now – and the curtain is rising ...

... and in center stage a throne, the dazzling brightest of which fills all space.

*“And from the throne [writes John in the Revelation of Jesus Christ] came a voice saying,*

*‘Praise our God, all you his servants,  
and all who honor him, small and great.’*

*And then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out,*

*‘Hallelujah!*

*For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.*

*Let us rejoice and exult and give God glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready;  
to her [the church of Christ] it has been  
granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure —  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

Revelation 19:5-8

Beloved of God, in your baptism you put on Christ ... at the day of Christ’s coming you shall be clothed in glory. In the meantime wear your garment well – it was custom made for you. The uniform of the Body of Christ.

*And the angel said, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to  
the marriage supper of the  
Lamb.’*

Revelation 19:9

Come, for all is ready!

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## RESOURCES:

The New Interpreter’s Bible. Vol. VIII. Eugene Boring. “Matthew” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995