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Matthew 22:1-14

Party People

These are the facts of the case. A king throws a party for his son, and not any old party. This is a black tie, wing-dinger of an affair. Everybody who is anybody is on the invite list. Forget neighbor Joe's surprise 50th birthday celebration down the street. This is no bring your own beer drop in drop out social event. Take your minds off the raucous excitement that happens off East Campus most weekend evenings. Jesus is describing a real party, big, grand, festive. Like the Rolling Stones playing Wallace Wade. Like the wedding feast of Lady Di and Prince Charles back before all went wrong. The king is throwing a party and when this king parties, the dance floor is open all night. Everyone drinks the finest wine and no one gets tipsy. There is only one big decked out table and it is the head table. At this party the food never runs out and everybody is invited to join the fun.

And yet, when the invitations go out, the slaves report that no one wants to come to the king's party. The king is left alone, all dressed up, an extravagant feast waiting, and nobody to share it with, a sad moment. It reminds me of those lyrics sung by Mick Jagger, *As Tears Go By*:

It is the evening of the day
I sit and watch the children play
Smiling faces I can see
But not for me
I sit and watch as tears go by
My riches can't buy everything
I want to hear the children sing

The king is desperate to see his children play, to hear his children sing, to have them at the party. His endless riches cannot buy the children's love; he can only extend the invitation and ask them to take part. So the king sends the servants back out, telling them to try again. Surely if they know the scope of what is being offered, they will come. "Been there, done that," one says. "No time," says another. "I can't take off work," quips a third. Still no one comes to the party.

The king's sadness turns to a gruesome and frightening anger. I'll start over then. "Punish those ungrateful invitees! Burn the city!" he screams, and then he says to his slaves, "go out into the streets and find everybody you can and bring them to the wedding hall. We're going to have a feast regardless."

And then the parable takes one last turn. When the wedding banquet is finally full of people off the streets, the king enters, and notices that one of the guests is not wearing the proper wedding garments. "How did you get in without a robe?" he asks. One might expect this hang-dog guest to mount an argument, "Nobody told me to wear one," or

“Your attendants ran out,” or “Where may I find one?” However, the guest says nothing. The king is incensed and has the speechless guest thrown out into the darkness.

It is a wild and wooly story with a brutal edge, defying simplistic allegorical categories. However at the heart of this parable is a message about the extravagant grace of God, and how we might be active participants in that grace, to live the Christian life.

Woody Allen famously said that 80% of life is simply showing up. The first thing to know about this party, is that showing up is not good enough. The great thing about a great party is that we get to participate; we get to join in the fun. God doesn't just invite us to the party, God wants us to turn the noun into a verb, to party at the party! Furthermore, this is one of those parties requiring some thought and preparation before one arrives.

In my first year out of divinity school I was serving as an associate pastor at a church down near Davidson College and was invited to offer the devotion at the swankiest retirement home between here and Atlanta. No one ever goes to the Pines without high heels and make-up, or for those of us who don't wear heels, without a dark suit and tie – make-up optional. You see, it's full of Presbyterians. The Christmas lunch is the highlight of the year. Everybody who is anybody gets an invitation. But I was new in town, had never been to the Pines before, and hadn't done my research. When I walked in the front door, a pair of 79 year old bouncers stopped me, “Son, where are you headed?” said the first. “Well, sir, I'm the new minister in town and I am here to do the devotion for the Christmas lunch.” He peered at me over his glasses, looking me up and down. “Minister? Loafers, a polo shirt and khakis? Are you sure you're not from one of the fraternities on campus? Is this rush week again? We've seen this trick before,” said the other, nodding his head. It was horribly embarrassing. One of the ladies came up to me during lunch and wondered if she could take me clothes shopping, that afternoon. In this parable, showing up is not good enough.

The wedding garments in Jesus' parable represent preparation, an active yes to God's extravagant invitation, a yes to the exciting adventure of following Jesus with our lives. Calvin said the wedding robe was the robe of good works. Augustine said it was the robe of love. Luther, being Luther, said it was the robe of faith. They are all right. Jesus is saying that God's kingdom is one in which love and justice, truth, mercy, and holiness of living reign. They are the clothes which we are to wear to God's party. And if we choose not to wear them, if we choose not to participate, the parable says, we are not welcome at the dance.

The second thing to know about this party, is that it is already going on. The kingdom of God is happening all around us; we might as well take part in the fun. Everywhere we turn, God is doing the kingdom's work of justice, of healing and redemption. Go down to the local homeless shelter to serve a meal, and take part in God the Father's kingdom vision, where the food never runs out and everybody eats together at one table. Find someone who is sick, someone who is lonely and desperately needs a friend, hold their hand and be the presence of God the Spirit's comforting love. Designate time on your knees, praying for God the Son's kingdom of peace to be known, and the violence that engulfs our world to end. Go out into the streets and invite someone to join the on-going party, and tell them about the kind of clothes they should wear.

Friday afternoon, a group of students from this Chapel and across campus, an intentionally interracial group, boarded a bus and drove all night, arriving in the early

dawn at a church in Mobile, Alabama. They have been taking part in God's kingdom party, rebuilding a house destroyed by the hurricane, befriending some strangers who have been dealt an awful blow in life, and talking with one another about the issues of race and poverty that Katrina further exposed, about how the kingdom of God is clothing oneself in the life of Christ who not only saves individual lives, but builds communities of justice and harmony.

The third thing I want you to know about this party is that it is serious life and death business, and the cross is the centerpiece. Jesus is telling this story less than a week before his death. He is already inside the city walls of Jerusalem. The religious leaders and Roman politicians are beginning their plot to trap him. If the parable sounds a little aggressive, a little frustrated, maybe even a little angry, it's because Jesus knows there is not much time left. Participating in the kingdom of God is the most important decision of our lives, and as Jesus stares down his own death, he wants to be sure we understand what it's all about. The invitation to God's kingdom party is an invitation to clothe ourselves with the cross of Christ.

In the 1940's, Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia Farm, an interracial Christian Community in Americus, Georgia. Jordan read his bible and believed that the Kingdom of God was a party everyone ought to be invited to, so he set about living his life in such a way, inviting anyone who would join him, blacks and whites to live together in community, to work the land together, to eat their meals together, to raise their children together, to be a sign of the kingdom in their living. Jordan and his companions were ridiculed constantly and found themselves embroiled in a string of legal battles in the segregated South. Seeking legal help, Clarence Jordan approached his brother, Robert, who was then a country lawyer, but who would go on to become a state senator and justice in the Georgia Supreme Court. The exchange went as follows:

Clarence: Will you help us Robert?

Robert: I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. If I represented you, I would lose everything. You see, it's different for you.

Clarence: Why is it different? I remember that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday as boys. And I expect that when we came forward the preacher asked you the same question that he asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?' I said, 'Yes.' What did you say, Robert?

Robert: I follow Jesus up to a point.

Clarence: Would that point by any chance be the cross?

Robert: That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I am not going to get crucified.

Clarence: Well Robert, I don't think you're a disciple of Jesus. I think you are an admirer of Jesus. I think you ought to go back to that church that you belong to and tell them that you are an admirer of Jesus, not a disciple.

This parable invitation, an invitation to take part in an extravagant, joyful party, the most important invitation we will ever receive, an invitation to shed the garments of our old lives, and put on the robe of Christ and his cross, to become a disciple of Jesus.

A couple of years ago I was walking with a student across the Chapel quad and noticed quite a crowd gathered around three quirky looking street preachers out by the bus stop. We couldn't resist the entertainment value so we took a detour on our walk and

listened in on the excitement. When we arrived, one of the preachers, a grizzly old guy with a long beard was holding up two signs. “Repent and believe in the Gospel!” one of them read. The other said, “Jesus is the way to a better life!” Another was preaching gruffly about the wages of sin being death, emphasizing over and over the words “sin” and “death,” at the same time frightening some students and being mocked by others.

The third preacher was hollering at two less than fully clad undergrads, “put some clothes on!” he yelled, “Cover yourselves with the armor of Jesus!” They sneered at him and walked along.

Rather than being entertained, I was incensed at the entire scene. I bit my tongue, wanting to yell, “You can’t preach that trash in the shadow of our Chapel! Every Sunday morning we do our best to present Christianity in sophisticated ways and here you all are, undoing our hard work. Don’t you know these are Duke students?! They only respond to SAT words!”

I was still fuming as my student friend and I walked back towards the Chapel doors. Can you believe the arrogance of those three, parading around our campus like some circus side-show? I have never heard such a frightening, manipulative, mean-spirited way to present the gospel,” I grouched. “Yeah,” the student said, looking down. “Too bad it’s all true.”