Title: We Are Already Late – First Presbyterian Franklin
Text: Matthew 22:1–14
Preacher: Eddie Bellis
Date: October 18, 2026

Tony Campolo tells about being in Honolulu. I'll tell it the way I remember it. He had flown from the East Coast, and at three o'clock in the morning his body had absolutely no interest in sleeping. So, he went looking for something to eat, and he found a little diner. We can imagine the kind of place.

At three in the morning, nobody is worried about atmosphere. There's a counter, a kitchen, somebody pouring coffee, and somebody cooking whatever people order at three o'clock in the morning. Campolo settled in for a late meal. Then the door opened.

Eight or nine women came through. They worked the streets at night and were loud. Their language was rough. They filled the room. And Campolo admits he was seriously thinking about finishing up and leaving.

Then he heard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." Another woman answered sarcastically, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party?" The woman snapped back, "No. I've never had a birthday party in my life. Too late to start now." Her name was Agnes.

Agnes had a scratchy personality. Thirty-nine years can teach you that. Don't expect too much. Don't let people feel sorry for you. Don't give anybody the chance to disappoint you. Nobody told her it was too late. She decided that herself. She said, "I've never had a birthday party in my life. Too late to start now."

After the women left, Campolo called the owner over. He asked, "Do those women come in here every night?"

"Yep."

"The woman sitting next to me?"

"Agnes? Every night."

Campolo said, "Tomorrow is her birthday. What if we threw her a birthday party?"

The owner smiled. He liked it and called his wife out from the kitchen. She liked it too. She liked it so much she said she would bake the cake. Campolo got decorations. Somebody made a sign that read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AGNES. And word spread. By three o'clock the next morning, the diner was packed. When Agnes opened the door, the whole place erupted: "Happy birthday!"

Agnes stopped. There were people everywhere, with decorations, candles, and a cake. And hanging where she couldn't possibly miss it was her name: "Agnes."

This was the woman who had said only the night before, "Too late to start now." Her eyes filled with tears as she blew out the candles. And then something rather strange happened. She didn't cut the cake. She asked if she could take it home.

Of course she could. So, Agnes carefully picked up her cake and carried it into the night.

Jesus tells this parable in the temple, and he is not talking with outsiders. He is talking to the chief priests and elders, the people who had been on God's guest list the longest. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." The King is having a party and spared no expense. He ordered the food to be prepared and made sure the tables were set. In his excitement, he made sure everything was ready.

The servants go to those invited and say, "Come." And those invited won't come.

So, the King sends out other servants. He says, "Tell them everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet." And still they don't come. They make excuses that make sense. One has a farm, and another has a business. Their in-laws are coming next weekend, and they have things to do. They have important things, necessary things.

We can imagine the excuses. "I really wish I could." "Tell the King thank you." "Maybe next time." "We're already late." Agnes said, "It's too late for me." They say, "I'm too busy for this." Different words, but same empty seat. Some become more than indifferent. They become angry. They seize the King's servants and mistreat them, even killing them.

That's a strange response to somebody saying, "Dinner is ready." And the King does not take it well. Matthew says he sent troops and burned their city. I'd rather skip that verse, but Matthew did not. Many scholars believe Matthew wrote after Rome burned Jerusalem, and he couldn't tell this story without remembering the smoke.

But then, human beings are strange creatures. Sometimes we fight the very thing being offered for our good. In the end, the King, the table, and all that food are still there. The King apparently intends to have a party. By any reasonable measure, it is already too late for this banquet. But this King does not seem to believe in too late.

"Go out into the streets. Go to the intersections. Go wherever the roads take you. Go and invite everyone you find," he tells his servants. So, they do.

Matthew says the servants gathered all the people they could find, "the bad as well as the good." Good and bad. Matthew doesn't tell us which were which. I've always thought that was rather considerate of him. They simply came, the good and the bad, together.

Imagine some of the servants arriving, knocking on the door. "Wedding banquet?" "Yes." "Here?" "Yes." "The King's?" "Yes." "You sure you've got the right person?" "Come in."

One by one, the empty places fill. People who had awakened that morning with no expectation of eating at the King's table are suddenly sitting there, both the good and the bad. People with colorful stories and shady histories, who were accustomed to being passed over because they are different. People who knew exactly why they weren't on the original guest list. If anyone had a right to say, "Too late to start now," it was these people.

And yet, there they are, and the wedding hall is full. It would be easy to hear this story and start thinking about all the people we ought to invite. And we should. But I've begun to wonder whether Jesus will let us stay in the role of the servants for long. Because we're guests too. Remember who first heard this story: not the people on the street corners, but the most faithful religious people in town. People a lot like us.

And now the story becomes uncomfortable again. The King walks into the banquet hall and discovers a man who isn't wearing wedding clothes. The older translations call it a wedding garment.

And I want to ask a question. What did the King expect? These people were gathered off the streets, good and bad alike. They had not planned to attend a wedding. Some probably had no idea when they woke up that morning that they would be eating at the King's table. And now one of them is thrown out because he isn't dressed properly? That troubles me.

But Matthew won't let us look away. The man is speechless. He is thrown into the outer darkness. And Jesus ends with words we would rather not hear: "Many are invited, but few are chosen." This is judgment, not just hospitality. The invitation matters. And so does our response.

I wish Matthew ended his story when the banquet hall was filled. Everyone invited, welcomed, and eating together. That would have made a lovely place to stop, but Jesus keeps talking.

And perhaps he keeps talking because he knows something about us. We can receive God's generosity without becoming generous. We can celebrate God's forgiveness without forgiving. We can sing about God's love while holding our love from the person sitting across the aisle. And Jesus didn't pretend those things do not matter. The invitation is free, but what we do with it matters terribly.

And perhaps that is harder than we imagine. We like being welcomed. We like being forgiven. We like knowing there is a place for us at the table.

But what happens when the King asks us to make room for somebody we would rather not sit beside? What happens when forgiveness means forgiving someone who hurt us? When mercy asks something of us? When following Jesus means leaving behind something we have grown comfortable carrying?

We wanted a place at the banquet. We are not entirely prepared for the banquet to change us.

Perhaps the wedding garment is about something more than clothing. Perhaps it is about what happens to us when we accept an invitation like this one. The King invited the good and the bad. He didn't require them to become good before they came. But he didn't invite them to remain unchanged.

And that sounds rather like Jesus. He welcomed sinners, and ate with people respectable society preferred to avoid, and touched those others wouldn't touch. But when Jesus said, "Follow me," he meant it. He invited people into a different way of living – a life shaped by mercy, forgiveness, justice, and love. Sometimes that invitation required them to leave something behind.

Maybe that is the trouble with the man without the wedding garment. He has come to the banquet, but he has resisted what the banquet means. I cannot say with certainty. Jesus doesn't explain the garment. But Matthew's Jesus takes our response to God's grace seriously. The trouble is not that he came in off the street. Everyone did. The trouble is that he came in and would not let the King's welcome change him. That is the danger Jesus will not let us ignore: not that we arrive late or unready, but that we sit down at the table and refuse to be changed by it.

But the cross isn't the end of the story. On the third day, the same hands that were nailed down reached out again to the very people who had run away. Grace kept reaching them, and something inside of them began to change.

Maybe that's why I can't divide Jesus' parable neatly between those who rejected the invitation and those who accepted it. Some days I recognize myself among both.

Some days I've been too busy to come. Some days I've come without expecting anything to change. And some days I've been astonished to discover that there was a place for me all along. Perhaps you have too. But the invitation is not simply to take our places at the table. It is to discover what happens when the King's welcome begins to change us.

But grace reaching for us is not the same as grace received. The King is serious about the garment because he is serious about us. He invites us as we are. He will not leave us as we are.

I wonder what Agnes did with that cake. I wonder where she carried it. I wonder whether she put it on a little table somewhere and just looked at it for a while. I wonder what it feels like to be thirty-nine years old and see your own name written across a cake for the first time.

Campolo says that after Agnes left, he prayed with the people in the diner. The owner looked at him afterward. "You didn't tell me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

Campolo told him, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties at three o'clock in the morning for women like Agnes."

And the owner said, "No, you don't. If there were a church like that, I'd join it."

I'd like to belong to a church like that. I suspect you do too. A church that doesn't believe it is too late. A church that goes out to the street corners and the three-in-the-morning diners and says, "The table is ready. Come." A church where those who have stopped expecting kindness are welcomed, and where the invitation begins to change us.

Some days we are too busy. Some days we are afraid to change. Some days we are already late. And perhaps the most frightening thing about this parable is that we might spend our lives at the King's table without letting his welcome change us. To receive forgiveness and never learn to forgive. To be loved and never learn to love. But with this King, it is not too late to respond. The food is still on the table.

The King is still holding a place for you. Still saying, "Come!"