

Rise to the Occasion

Matthew 22:1-16

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

It was the wedding of the year, May 19, 2018. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle were married in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. The groom, Prince Harry, is the son of Princess Diana, and Prince Charles, a member of the British Royal Family. The bride, Meghan Markle, is an American who worked briefly as an actress. On the morning of the wedding, Queen Elizabeth II (Prince Harry's grandmother) conferred the titles of Duke of Sussex, Earl of Dumbarton and Baron Kilkeel on Harry. Upon the marriage, Meghan Markle became the Duchess of Sussex, Countess of Dumbarton, and Baroness Kilkeel. Like many around the world, I watched portions of the wedding on television.

It was a regal affair, blending music from both the Church of England and the African American tradition. "Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer" brought a tear to Harry's eye, since it was also sung at his mother's (Diana's) funeral. "Stand By Me" was played, as well as Jester Hairston's "Amen" along with many other arrangements in both traditions.

Attire for the wedding was specified in the invitations "Dress Uniform, Morning Coat or Lounge Suit" for men. For women, "Day Dress and Hat." Harry wore the frock coat uniform of the Blues and Royals (Royal Horse Guards and First Dragoons) in which he was commissioned and served for ten years. He wore the rank of Major.

The wedding dress was made of "double-bonded silk cady, cushioned by an underskirt in triple silk organza and had a boat neckline, long sleeves and sweeping train. Megan's silk veil was 16 feet long and embroidered with 55 flowers," representing the 53 countries of the Commonwealth, wintersweet which grows in front of Harry and Meghan's cottage, and the California Poppy, representing the flower of California, her home state. And of course, a diamond tiara made in 1932 for Queen Mary. ¹

As you can see, some weddings are big affairs. Some invitations are also big affairs and require attention, should you be lucky enough to receive one.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wedding_of_Prince_Harry_and_Meghan_Markle

There is a story told about Winston Churchill receiving an invitation from his friend George Bernard Shaw, the playwright. It read, "Enclosed are two tickets for the first-night performance of a play of mine. Bring a friend – if you have one!" Churchill replied, "I thank you very much for the invitation and the tickets. Unfortunately, I'm engaged on that night, but could I have tickets for the second night — if there is one!"

Jesus tells the story of a wedding feast. Mr. Big, the number one mover and shaker in the region has a son who wants to get married. So, Mr. Big sends out invitations, announcing that on Saturday afternoon there is to be a wedding. All the other movers and shakers already have things to do, places to go, business to conduct, trips planned, ball games to attend. They can't make it Saturday. They probably talked among themselves, "Who does he think he is? Like we're all just sitting around with an open social calendar waiting for the possibility that his family might invite us to something!" And they smile at the arrogance of such a man. Some push the messenger out of the door. And a few harass and insult the actions of Mister Big by beating up on the messenger pretty good. Not a pretty picture for the beginning of a party. This is much more than a social snub.

Mister Big tries one more time. This time he'd made all the preparations for the party, he invites "... everyone they found in the main streets, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests."

What's going on beneath the surface of this parable? The first clue is the king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. And who do you think the son is in this parable? Pretty obvious, right!? It's Jesus, of course. The second clue comes in the outrageous plot. How many people do you know who would kill the postman for delivering a wedding invitation? And how likely is it that the feast is going to be put on hold while Mister Big mobilizes an army to burn down a whole city to the ground? I can't understand this story without knowing what is behind it: Jesus is disappointed that so few of God's people accept the invitation to celebrate with God's son.

The prophets had invited them but some of them killed the prophets. Then in 70 CE Rome sacked and burned Jerusalem, demolishing the Temple right down to the retaining walls. And then, the Jewish community of Christ's followers opened up to people like us, the gentiles, the unwashed, the second shift of guests. And a new controversy set in. These gentile latecomers

had no history with the living God. They acted as if God's grace gave them permission to live any way they wanted.

Pretty soon these first Christians had a discipline problem on their hands. These followers of Jesus sat down at God's table with no sense of what it meant to be there. As far as they knew, they showed up in God's presence however they wanted to show up. Didn't the invitation to the party say come as you are? Everybody is welcome, nothing required, no fancy clothes, no etiquette, no R.S.V.P.

Apparently, there is more required than just showing up for the party. Being an invited guest does not mean you can do as you please. Being invited at the last minute does not mean anything goes. I've been invited to a party given by God himself. And I'm asked to rise to the occasion.

The authority of Jesus is challenged in five encounters with religious officials in this Gospel. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" the chief priests and the elders asked him as he was teaching in the Temple. Three parables recorded in Matthew's Gospel are incorporated in his response. The first about two kinds of sons, the second about two kinds of farmers, and this third one about a wedding banquet and two kinds of responses. These are sometimes referred to as the "Israel Parables" but Dale Bruner prefers the "People-of-God Parables" because they "paint the picture of the responses of the people of God, old and new, to God's coming."²

These are also known as "judgment parables." They teach the urgency of faith, but not just verbalized faith or formal, even conversion, kind of faith. These require a special kind of faith – obedient faith, if judgment is to be avoided. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 there is a similar message. "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who take it. . . .The many and the few."

Texts like these have created no small amount of anxiety for people of faith. Followers of Jesus have had to wonder whether their faith is enough. Many are "called" but only a few "chosen."

² Bruner, Frederick Dale, *Matthew Volume 2 The Church Book Matthew 13-28* (Dallas, London, etc.: Word Publishing, 1990) p. 762

“Am I one of the chosen?” we wonder. “Will I be wearing the correct clothing when the time comes? Is my faith an obedient faith or am I too distracted by the things of life?”

Christian faith puts us in life with confidence, not anxiety. That is literally what the word means, “with faith.” But there is a caution here. We do need to re-evaluate from time to time, to see whether we have grown complacent in our faith, whether we’ve conformed to the world around us rather than being transformed by the presence of Christ within us, and among us. A parable like this has a way of re-framing your self-evaluation. If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? There may be a day coming when that question will be asked of each of us.

John Calvin, the Father of the Reformed faith, maintained that the “clothes” we are to put on for this banquet is Christ himself. In Romans 13:14 we read we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and in Galatians 3:27 we read “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.” Apart from being clothed with Christ, we stand judged before God. We don’t want to be ill-suited or underdressed for this occasion. Many are invited but few are chosen! Many begin the journey of faith but far fewer persevere to the end. We become distracted by endless numbers of other things to do, other endeavors that seem so important at the time. We take God’s invitation too lightly.

The problem is that we may become so well suited to this world that we will be found completely unsuitable for the kingdom of heaven. This story tells me that the underdressed wedding guest got bounced because he wouldn’t rise to the occasion. Maybe he thought the host was lucky he came at all. Maybe he thought he was doing Mister Big a favor by showing up to eat the food that otherwise would have gone to waste. If that was the case, he made a serious mistake about who was doing whom a favor.

Whatever his logic, he didn’t rise to the occasion. Instead he demeaned it by refusing to change. And I’m not really talking about changing clothes. Like everything else in the story, wedding clothes have a deeper meaning. Jesus is talking about a whole new way of life. About a way of life that honors the host, one that recognizes the privilege of being invited into his presence, even if the invitation arrives at the last minute.

This underdressed guest's mistake was not that he showed up in shorts. His mistake was that he showed up short on right living and thought no one would notice, least of all the host.

Here Jesus is talking about the central question of my life. This party of God has to do with my relationship with the Holy One and my response to the grace of God. That's the most important thing about me. It's not some little side-bet, or side-hustle that I keep going for fun or just in case. While this story addresses the particular situation in the life of the first Christians, deeper down its talking about what happens every Sunday.

Worship may not be a wedding party, but it's certainly meant to be a rehearsal dinner, where each of us get to practice our parts. Everyone in Los Angeles County is invited to be here this morning, or in some other place of worship. But as you know, some of them had other things to do. Some are at work, some working out, some off to the desert, some still in bed.

However, we showed up this morning, not necessarily because we are any better than anyone else. For good and bad reasons, we decided to accept the invitation this morning. Quite possibly some of us, like the underdressed guest, probably rolled into worship without thinking much about it, especially since we're worshipping at home these days. We just kind of showed up with our spiritual shirt tails hanging out. We may even hope no one can see the ways we too have refused to change. How we have refused to surrender our fears and resentments; refused to share our wealth; refused to respect the dignity of every human being; wearing the same old clothes when I come to the king's banquet, the clothes I prefer rather than the clothes of new life.

We're talking about the most important party of our lives. It's no casual come and go affair – just do a “touch-down” and be off to something else, something more important. It's life and death! God is looking for people who will rise to the occasion of honoring his Son. We can do that in shorts and running shoes as well as we can do it in suits and high heels. Because the wedding clothes we're talking about are not made out of silk or denim. Clothes for the party are made from the whole fabric of my life, using patterns God has given me. Patterns of justice, forgiveness, loving kindness, and peace. And when I put them on, they fit like a glove and are absolutely stunning. I wonder, why would I want to wear anything else — especially if I want to be ready for the party, whenever the invitation comes? Amen