

“Wedding Crashers”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 9, 2011

Matthew 22: 1-14
Philippians 4: 1-9

Have you ever thrown a party and didn't know who would come? For many of us, that doesn't happen very often, because we ask people to RSVP if they can or cannot attend. Weddings are the best examples of losing sleep over how many will be attending. I have seen many a couple and family nearly lose their minds over the numbers coming to a wedding, and fearing if there will be “wedding crashers” who will upset their carefully laid, detailed plans.

But have you ever hosted an event, and when the time came for it to begin, you had absolutely no clue whether anyone would come? Even though it was seven years ago, I clearly recall that happening here at John Knox when we hosted our first Hispanic Vacation Bible School. Months of planning went into that week. We had food ready, crafts ready, recreation ready, music ready. We had young men and women from Mexico here, helping us make our final preparations, and then they went out into the community and literally invited people from door-to-door. We did everything we knew to do to get ready, and then we waited. Monday evening rolled around, and we waited. And we waited.

And after all that work, and all that planning, and all that effort – 10 children came that first night. 10. Was that a disappointment? I don't know. I think in some ways, we were hopeful that more would come after all the work so many had put in to inviting people. But in another sense, we knew that to start something new with no established base to work from would be a risk. So in a positive sense, we had ten children come to a party when we could very easily have had none. Of course, the happy ending to the story is that our party was not just for one night – it lasted the entire week. And by Friday, we had 30-35 children attending, not to mention some of their parents and family. To think that the seven years ago we had 10 children show up the first evening for VBS, and this past year we had an average of 85 children attend each evening. God is indeed good!

In the story we have read from Matthew today, Jesus tells of a king who threw a wedding banquet for his son and invited many. It was customary in those days for someone to send out a first invitation for a gathering, and then when things were ready, to send a servant to those invited and tell them that it is time to come. So, the master sends his servants out, and waits expectantly for him to return with all those whom he invited. But instead of people returning to his house for dinner, all the servants bring are excuses.

“But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them” (22:5-6). Not exactly the kind of RSVP the king had expected, huh? This infuriates the king, and he responds to the ungrateful invitees with harsh actions: “He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city” (22:7). So the king is left with a

wedding banquet, ungrateful invited guests, and lots of food to eat. What's a king to do?

"Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (22:8-10).

Marvin McMickle comments: *In Matthew's world, this parable was a reminder that God had initially invited the people of ancient Israel to be God's people. God chose a people who had begun as nomadic wanderers and who ended up being slaves in Egypt for 430 years. God did so in order to use them as an example of how much God can bless and how high God can place any people who are willing to honor God's will and God's word above all else.*

When Christ appeared, the parable goes on to suggest, those who were invited to the king's banquet failed to show up when the day for the big event finally arrived. In the preceding chapter of Matthew, Jesus rode into Jerusalem like a conquering king amid shouts of "Hosanna." However, just five days later as Jesus stood on trial before Pontius Pilate, the people in that same city cried out, "Crucify him!" (Matt. 27:22) The time had come. The Messiah had entered the ancient city, but in the end the people of Jerusalem did not accept God's invitation.

Within the Christian community there are those members like the ones in the parable who refuse the invitation from God in one way or another. They want the safe, soft side of discipleship, but they shy away from the more difficult work of outreach and social justice. They want blessings from God, but they cannot be found when it is time to share in the work of ministry. They can always be counted on to share in a free dinner at the church, but they are not willing to serve a meal in the hunger center or hand out a bag of groceries at the food pantry. They want peace on earth, but they do not want to work toward that end. They want to end world hunger, but they do not want to miss a meal themselves or make a contribution to work toward that end.

When the king's first invited guests refused his invitation, he did what many coaches on sports teams will do; he shifted the lineup that was on the field. When a coach believes that the players in the game at any moment have lost their energy or their focus or their desire to win, the coach does not just concede the game to the other team. The coach is more likely to bench those who were playing and put somebody else in the game instead.

*God has the authority to bench those who refuse to answer God's invitation for service. The steady decline in the size and influence of the church in the U.S. and western Europe should be viewed in relationship to the steady increase in the growth and influence of the church in Latin America, Asia and Africa. God is not dead, as many western theologians have been insisting for the last forty years. It is only the zeal and passion of some in the church that seems to have died (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 165-169).*

This image of a coach who has the authority to bench players and call-up new players is reinforced by the end of the parable. For even when those guests – "both good and bad" – are seated for the wedding banquet, the king still has expectations of them. Upon noticing that one man was not wearing a wedding robe, "the king

said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (22:12-13).

While this parable also occurs in Luke, only this addendum appears in Matthew. Many have interpreted the second group of invited guests as the church, and for Matthew, that means that just because you have been accepted into the wedding banquet does not mean you no longer are beyond reproach. As Richard Spalding writes, "The error of the unrobed wedding guest involves fruitfulness. The unrobed guest does not show the fruits of living as a guest at the banquet of grace. His downfall comes in the moment when, asked by the host to account for the way he appears, he has nothing to say" (ibid, 168).

Hunter Farrell is the director of Presbyterian World Mission, and he spoke at the presbytery meeting we hosted here at John Knox in August. In the latest issue of *Mission Crossroads*, Hunter reflects on his experience twenty years ago of travelling throughout the U.S., with fellow colleagues from Congo. For three months, they visited eight presbyteries and 66 congregations, sharing about their service as missionaries in Congo. He writes:

After this exhausting, exhilarating mission marathon of Sunday worship services, midweek Bible studies, women's circles and more potluck meals than you can count, one of my Congolese companions looked at me and asked, "We've talked with hundreds of Presbyterians in these weeks, and we haven't heard one person share about what God has done in their life. Why is that?" I was speechless.

Over time I realized that our society was much more secularized and that most Christians found it difficult to talk about their own faith, about prayer and about God's power in their life. Our church, like most American denominations, has shifted its emphasis to a short-term mission focus, opening up the possibility for thousands of congregations to engage directly in mission. Yet very few teams engage in evangelism in distant contexts. Our global partners have shown us that attention to physical needs is important – but it's not enough. "The abundant life" that Jesus promised us touches all aspects of life together: body, soul, and spirit.

Mission is not exclusively about acts of compassion . . . (mission must also include) a change of heart as well. This change of the heart is the mark of all those who have responded to God's offer of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It's the change that transforms the proud into humble servants, the self-satisfied into the Christ-centered (*Mission Crossroads*, Fall 2011, www.pcusa.org/missioncrossroads).

What will it take for us to experience a change of heart? What will it require for us to be transformed from proud to humble, from self-satisfied to Christ-centered? What will it take for us to stop making excuses, believing that the king's banquet will always be there for us, the invited – dare I say, the entitled?

God expects our best, not our minimum. God seeks those who will serve and sacrifice, not those who will make excuses and hoard what they possess. I wish I could sugar-coat this, folks, but there's no way around it. The coach is evaluating our zeal, our effort, and our commitment. Will we stay on the field and play with inexhaustible effort, or will we be replaced by a team who shows greater desire, sacrifice, and will?

"For many are called, but few are chosen." Don't live a life of entitlement; live a life of gratitude for being chosen by a gracious king. Thanks be to God. Amen.