

FOCUSED ON FAITH: BE DRESSED

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Matthew 22:1-14

In December of 1996, my wife and I were newlyweds. We had been married for six months. We were thrilled that year to receive a whole slew of invitations to New Year's Eve parties. We had so many invitations for that night that we literally had to get out a map and plot our party-route through Davidson and Williamson counties. We don't get invited out anymore for New Years. Our friends have gotten old and they're in bed by 9:30. I'm pretty sure most of them tape New Year's Eve from Times Square and then watch it the next morning over their oatmeal.

Our first stop that year was at the home of my wife's friend Rusty. Rusty and his wife had done well in their careers and had recently purchased a house in Belle Meade. If you're not familiar with Nashville, Belle Meade is the old-money section of town. Property there can be pretty pricey. Our friend Rusty knew how to fix up a house and they had found a deal on this home that needed a lot of work. When the renovations were complete, they threw a New Year's party to show off their home—as well they should.

We arrived at the party. I didn't know a soul but my wife knew people there so we worked the room together eventually making our way to the dining room where the caterers had laid out a nice spread. We picked up plates from the sideboard and I followed my wife to the main table. It was covered with party food—crudités, pastries, cheeses, dips, and more. I knew that to be polite that I was only to take a few small portions. This wasn't the midnight buffet on a Carnival Cruise. It would be ill-mannered of me to shovel food on my plate. I followed my wife around the table taking a little of this and a little of that. But then we got back to where we had started and there was a gleaming, silver chafing dish. And inside this chafing-dish were Swedish meatballs. Now, I love me some Swedish meatballs. I only occasionally see them at parties. We don't make them at home; we're not Swedish. So, I took a toothpick and stabbed a Swedish meatball and placed it on my plate. It looked rather lonely so I skewered another one and placed it on the plate. At this point I got a little greedy. I remembered that we were on the clock and had other parties to attend. I wasn't sure I would get back for any more Swedish meatballs. And, for all I know, the food at the next party may be pork rinds and catsup. So, I skewered a third Swedish meatball. But instead of putting it on my plate, I glanced around the room, saw that the coast was clear—no one was looking at me—and I popped that third meatball into my mouth. I was very proud of myself.

The only problem with this plan was that the third meatball had been sitting dead center in the chafing-dish, on the bottom of the pan, directly above the Sterno. I figure it had been there for four or five hours, and all that time it had been

absorbing the heat from the fire until the temperature of that meatball was approximately that of the surface of the sun. And it was currently in my mouth burning a hole through my tongue. I didn't have a glass of cold water, or ice tea, or anything to put out the fire. So, I did the only thing I could. I spit out that Swedish meatball.

Now, if you think that I spit it back into the chafing dish, you would be mistaken. And I am very disappointed that you have so little faith in me. I was raised better than that. No, I spit the meatball onto my plate with the other meatballs. But I made enough commotion so that everyone in the room was glaring at me. And they managed to look down at me in such a way that I could clearly see the disgust in their faces at that ill-mannered man spitting food at the banquet table. Not everyone was looking at me. Half the room was looking at my wife with what I can only describe as abject pity. "Oh, that poor woman is married to him. Maybe, she can get out of it."

For the past twenty years, whenever we are at a party and there are Swedish meatballs in a chafing dish, my wife will poke me in the arm and say, "They're probably hot."

I tell this story because it is about etiquette, about manners, about acting in an appropriate way given the situation. At a fancy, catered party in Belle Meade, it is not appropriate to spit food. However, if you are at a summer picnic eating watermelon then seed-spitting is perfectly acceptable. There might even be a seed-spitting contest.

Our reading today is also about manners and etiquette, about behaving properly in a given situation. It is a parable that we find in Matthew's gospel. And, as you will see, it is a harsh parable about a man invited to a fancy party who does not act appropriately.

Jesus introduces this parable by saying that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gives a wedding banquet for his son. Immediately, we know that this will be a fine affair for the nobility and elite. A royal wedding would be the social event of the year. The king sends out invitations to those he wants to attend. Then, when the day arrives, he sends his servants to tell the invitees that the event is about to begin. But those who have been invited, for some reason, refuse to attend. So the king sends a second wave of servants to those on the guest list with the message that the meal really is ready, the oxen and fatted calves have been slaughtered. It was time to come to the banquet. This time, the invitees not only ignored the servants, they made light of the invitation and they went about their everyday business. Some of the invitees even seized the servants, beat them up, and killed them.

The king responds by sending his troops to kill those who murdered his slaves and then to burn their city. The king informs his servants that the wedding is still on, but those originally invited were not worthy. The king then instructs his servants to go into the *main streets* and invite everyone to the wedding. The servants do as they are told and they go out and gather up all the people they can find, *the good and the bad*, until the wedding hall is filled.

Now, up until this point, this parable sounds like a lesson Jesus is teaching about those who ignore God's call. The gospel writer Matthew, in sharing this parable with his own congregation, would be telling them about the Jews who had heard God's word but who chose to ignore it—think about the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Furthermore, Matthew's congregation would have known about those disciples and missionaries who had been mistreated and even killed as they shared God's word. Many of Matthew's people were themselves Jews who had been cast out of their own synagogues for accepting Jesus as the messiah. Matthew's people would understand the allegory of the parable, that the king represents God who first called the Jews and was scorned, and then called everyone.

The parable does not stop there. The parable continues past this lesson when the king enters the banquet hall to visit the guests who have been brought by the servants and he notices a man in attendance who is not wearing a wedding robe. A wedding robe would have been a special article of clothing reserved for weddings. The king goes to the man and says, *Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?* The man is speechless. The king orders his servants to *Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Jesus concludes the parable saying, *For many are called, but few are chosen.*

As I said, this is a harsh parable. It starts off with a king sending out invitations to his son's wedding. But those invitees kill the king's messengers and the king retaliates and kills them. To the average person, we might be amused at this absurd story of the king and the elite. However, the story is brought to our level when the king sends his servants out to the highways and byways to invite everyone they can find to the wedding. We might not be on the first guest list, but we would certainly be included on the second go-round. And we would go. Who would pass up the opportunity to attend the king's party? Then the king arrives and spots the man without the wedding robe and casts him out and we say that's not fair. But it is.

This parable appears to be a parable of judgment—judgment against those who are invited but who don't accept, and judgment against those who accept but who aren't prepared. But is the parable really that harsh? Consider the number of times that the king extends invitations. There is the save-the-date invitation, the day-of invitation, the second day-of invitation, and then there is the open invitation. This is a king who wants people to attend his banquet. The banquet is a big deal and

demands that people who attend be fully engaged, to arrive with the appropriate garment. The man cast out by the king was willing to come and eat the food but not to show respect for the wedding—the purpose of the banquet. Does this mean that we should carry a wedding robe around with us just in case Queen Elizabeth invites us to Harry and Megan's wedding?¹ Yes.

In this parable, Jesus is teaching that if you want to be admitted to God's kingdom then you must possess the right spirit, to act in a certain way, to be dressed appropriately.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the Parable of the Wedding Banquet is most certainly an Advent parable. Jesus reminds us over and over that we don't know the date or hour of God's kingdom, but we must always be ready. We must lead our lives with the expectation that at any moment we may encounter the kingdom. The season of Advent is a time of waiting and a time of preparation. We are to prepare ourselves not for a birth, but for the recognition that God is with us. Through the season of Advent, I will continue with this sermon series called *Focused on Faith* which explores the various ways that we can prepare for God's presence in our lives. We must Be Awake, Be Hungry, and, as we have seen today, Be Dressed.

In a few minutes we are going to gather at the table to join in God's feast. This is a banquet to which we have been invited. Are we ready? Are we prepared? Are we dressed in an attitude of reverence? Or are we just running to the table to grab free food? If so, then be careful. It's probably hot.

¹ Prince Harry's engagement to Meghan Markle was announced this week.