

“Talk the talk; walk the walk”  
Matthew 22:1-14

More often than not when you arrive at a wedding you're handed a program that outlines the order of the service and lists the wedding participants. It's a helpful thing to have and gives you something to fiddle with while you wait for the wedding party to arrive.

You can see the bride and grooms name, the names of the bridesmaids and groomsmen, the parent's names, the flower girl and the ring bearer, and so on. Trouble is, with the exception of the bride and groom, and the flower girl and ring bearer, all the other participants are hard to identify.

Which one is the brother of the groom? Which one is John, the brides' brother? I think it would be helpful to pin a number on the back of the wedding party and then list them all in the program by a number by their name. Then we'd know who's who.

**Today's passage is an “allegorical parable,”** which means that things in the story stand for other things. It's hard enough to understand the plain meaning of the story; even harder when everything in the story stands for something else. There should be numbers. Here's one way to think about it:

In the story,

The King is God

The Son is Jesus

The marriage feast is the relationship God invites people to have with him

The servants are the prophets of Israel

Those invited are those who first rejected Jesus

So, let's look at the story again: the king planned a great wedding celebration for his son, Jesus. Long before the day of the wedding the king sent out “save the date” notices. Later, the formal invitations were sent out.

On the day of the wedding, the king sent out his servants saying, “The day is here. Come to the celebration.” But those who had been invited chose *not* to come. The king sent more servants saying, “Look, the dinner is ready, the fatted calves have been prepared, the wine has been poured. Won't you please come to the celebration?”

“But,” says the gospel writer, “they made light of the invitation,” and went back to their farms and jobs as if this were any other ordinary day. Indeed, adds Matthew, the refusal of the guests even turned violent and led to the death of some and the destruction of their city (which scholars feel is Matthew's way of referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD at the hands of the Romans).<sup>i</sup>

What was the king to do? He had a son who was eager to marry and a wedding reception where the salad was wilting and the main course was growing cold. He had to come up with a different strategy. “Go into the main streets,” said the king, “and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” The servants did just that and brought back everyone they found, good and bad, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

Now, the people who first heard this story could relate to it because it *mirrored* their own story. It was playing out in front of them. Jews and Gentiles, the good and the bad were being invited into the faith, and the very nature of their community, the very fabric of the church, was being changed. This story is playing out in our day, too.

**Most everybody knows that the institutional church is in trouble.** Some claim that 90% of all American churches have plateaued or are losing members. Today the fastest growing religious sub-group in America is called “nones,” (that’s N-O-N-E-S). When asked to state a religious preference, they simply reply: none.<sup>ii</sup>

NONES once filled our pews but now have drifted away leaving us to wonder who, if anyone, will come to the marriage feast and eat from the messianic banquet table. Just as the king once sent his servants into the streets of the city to invite in those they met, both good and bad, now the king sends us to do same – invite everyone so that the wedding hall— the church — might be filled.

Which is a scary proposition. I mean it’s one thing to invite friends and neighbors, people like you and me. It’s another thing altogether to invite in “*everyone*”. It raises all sorts of questions: What if they don’t look like us? What if they have an accent? What if they come from another part of town? What if they’re different?

And more than that... what if I do find the courage to invite them, and then the king finds their presence problematic? I mean, that’s what happened in the parable, right? In our lesson this morning the king starts acting like a nightclub bouncer and says to one of the guests, “How did you get in here without the proper clothes? This is a wedding banquet, after all. The least you can do is show up wearing the right kind of clothes!”

With every ounce of restraint, we want to protest and say to the king, “You just asked us to go into the streets and invite *everyone*, the good and the bad. How can you hold it against them if they don’t have the right kind of clothes?”

Here’s another place where that wedding program to help us know who’s who and what’s what because in this allegorical parable, everything stands for something else. In this case the guest who showed up without a wedding garment may stand for all those Christians who have found their way into the church but have not clothed themselves in the garments of Christ, symbols of the new life he invites us to put on.

And what are those garments? Paul spells that out in Colossians 3:12-14: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”.

Some of you may remember a time when restaurants had a dress code; where men, for example, were expected to wear a sport coat. And if you showed up at the restaurant without one, rather than not let you in to dine, the management would loan you a sport coat so you could look the part. Didn’t matter that the sleeves were too long or the button wouldn’t button or the jacket was bright red, you looked the part.

I kind of wish that the king in our lesson had used a similar discretion. Rather than chastising the guest for being underdressed, rather than tossing him out on his ear, I wish that the king had acted more graciously and generous. I wish the king had said, “Sir, you can’t attend the party dressed like that. But, look, here’s a spare wedding garment. I would be pleased to loan it to you.”

But no, the king gets angry, not because a single guest was underdressed. Remember, he stands for something else. Rather, **the king gets angry because many who called themselves Christians were not acting the way Christians are supposed to act.**

They failed to clothe themselves in those Christ-like garments of compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, and above all else — love. And as a result, the king’s wrath burned hot against them because they failed to live up to their end of the bargain.

It's true that all are invited, the good and the bad, but it's also true that there's a certain code of conduct for those who accept the invitation and call themselves "Christian." As Jesus said it earlier in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven". In other words, you can't just talk the talk. You also have to walk the walk.

You and I call ourselves "Christian". That's our talk. How's our walk?

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<sup>i</sup> Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospel Without Blaming the Jews* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 77.

<sup>ii</sup> Pew Research: *Religion and Public Life*, October 9, 2002.