Sermon Text – Sunday, October 11, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Exodus 32:1-14; 2nd Reading: Philippians 4:1-9
Scripture for Message: Matthew 22:1-14 "Wedding Robe"

This scripture reading picks up where we left off last week – another of Jesus' parables that Matthew presents to a Jewish congregation not long after the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in about the year 70 AD. Matthew records a debate between Jesus and the chief priests, elders, and the Pharisees, who by this time question Jesus' authority. This is not a debate between two parties uninformed about biblical traditions – Jesus debates with chief priests and Pharisees who are educated interpreters of Jewish biblical traditions. So, this is not a debate about Christianity versus the Jewish faith, and it is not a debate about Gentile versus Jew, although as we extend the metaphor over time and space it certainly has been interpreted in those very ways. Jesus is continuing to debate with these Jewish religious leaders in an effort to move them into a realization that God's judgment will fall on those who reject God's messengers – themselves included. (Very much like the last parable we explored about the vineyard.)

Similar to the last parable we explored, there is violence in this tale. The perpetrators of this violence were those initially invited to the banquet and the host of the banquet who inflicts violence on them in retribution for their violent acts. Matthew also mentions weeping and gnashing of teeth as the one who isn't appropriately garbed is thrown into the outer darkness. Anyone familiar with Matthew's gospel will note that there is a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth as he retells Jesus' parables.

You see for Matthew, judgment is an essential feature of Jesus' message because, for Matthew, it is an enactment of God's justice. The kingdom of heaven, for Matthew, will bring God's justice into the world, justice that includes judgment. Judgment that includes punishment. It is important for us to note that the punishment and judgment passed on to the one inappropriately clothed is, according to Matthew, a symbol of divine judgment and not a model for Christian behavior toward anyone deemed unworthy. This is God's doing, not ours.

So, let's talk about this parable and what its message was to those early Jewish religious authorities and what it is to us today. I wonder if the message can be much the same even after all these centuries.

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Jesus states that the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. I am imagining some lavish affair, like the wedding of Travis and Taylor, or Prince William and Katherine – a large elaborate affair. Who would not want to attend a wedding banquet like that? When you consider a banquet held in the first century, in a feudal society, turning down an invitation from the King would be tantamount to treason. You don't reject your king; I mean wars have been fought for less. But here we are, the king has sent his messengers to gather the guests he invited but they would not come, so the king sends more messengers to tell the invitees that the meal is ready, the banquet table is set. All is ready for them to come to the wedding banquet but still they refuse and go as far as to beat and, in some cases, kill the messengers.

The king is enraged, and who could blame him – all is ready and no one shows up – so he "destroyed those murderers" and he burns their cities. Well, that's a little harsh but it is the first century where kings and kingdoms operate a little differently. However, there is still the question of this wedding feast he prepared with no guests showing up – so the king sends his messengers out to gather everyone they find – both good and bad so that the wedding hall is filled with guests.

If Jesus had stopped right there, his point was made effectively for the religious leaders who were listening. Those who refuse the invitation and mistreat the messengers will be replaced. I am thinking that they would by now realize that Jesus again was talking about them, but they were not moved. Maybe they thought that the rules didn't apply to them, surely there would be exceptions made for them because they were so very religious. They were strictly observant of Jewish law and surely Jesus was mistaken in his assessment of them.

So, maybe that is why Jesus continues in his parable with the insertion about the king noticing someone there who was not wearing a wedding robe. The king calls this person friend and asks how they got into the banquet without a robe, but they didn't have an answer – the person was speechless. Because of that, the king tells his attendants to bind, and the person throws them into the outer darkness. Jesus concludes his parable with the statement, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

You could assume from this part of the parable that maybe this one was of questionable character and did not meet the criteria for getting in – they did however get in, and when Jesus tells this parable he makes a point of saying that the messengers gathered both good and bad. That is why I don't think the reason for their being "ejected" was that they were bad. I wonder if the judgment of the king fell on this one because they didn't have an answer to how they got in without the robe. I wonder if that is a statement about the person's overall perception of the importance of the invitation. The fact they were left speechless was a result of not taking the invitation seriously at all and not being "ready." Jesus encouraged his followers to stay grounded in their faith and to be ready to explain the hope they have in Jesus, while treating others gently and respectfully.

Now I don't know if wearing a wedding robe was a requirement, there certainly isn't much information about first century Jewish wedding traditions to tell us about that. I wonder though if the requirement is like any response to an invitation extended by the king – dress appropriately or you will be left out. Don't show up to a wedding banquet dressed like you are going to the ballpark. So, when the king looks over his guests and spots someone who does not look like they fit in, he will ask questions. Many are called but few are chosen!

I wonder too if Jesus was driving home a point to the chief priests and elders about their feelings of exceptionalism. No one will share in the banquet based on pedigree – only a belief in Jesus and the cross will enable us to remain in the banquet. Maybe this person felt the rules about wedding attire did not apply to them, they assumed that they could enter the banquet hall on their own terms. Like I said I don't know if wearing a wedding robe was a tradition in first century Judea – who can tell. Jesus is clear about one thing – when the appointed time comes, God will show no mercy to those who are not prepared and who do not accept God's terms. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I wonder if the "wedding robe" is more symbolic than anything else. There are varying opinions regarding the significance of that wedding robe. Some scholars will say it is symbolic of righteousness, or of salvation. Others say it symbolizes our clothing ourselves in Christ. That makes sense to me, if you don't put on Christ and become a new person, you too will

be thrown into the outer darkness. The 'robe' is outward evidence of an inward transformation. Notably, Jesus tells his listeners that the messengers brought everyone they could find into the banquet hall – the good and the bad. The one the King singled out was not singled out because they were bad but because the "attire" was inappropriate. This person came to the banquet hall, thinking they too were chosen but they were unwilling to change and show with outward appearance that they took the invitation seriously.

Jesus makes the claim that many are called but few are chosen, these religious leaders, the chief priests and pharisees, the scribes and elders, and this one without the robe all felt chosen but without clothing themselves appropriately none of them remain in the banquet hall. Jesus makes it clear that judgment awaits. You cannot enter on the basis of your own works, or by thinking you are "good enough" unless you accept the invitation with the proper attitude.

The lesson for us is just as clear, this is a serious invitation and the time to accept is now. Jesus calls us to come to his table, this banquet that he has prepared for us – let us examine our hearts before we accept that invitation. It is not an invitation that you respond to with a maybe, it is not an invitation that you stall around waiting for something better to come along. The invitation is open to everyone, but your acceptance must be with a serious heart, you must be clothed appropriately.

What are the attitudes that Jesus would consider appropriate for joining that eternal banquet? I wonder if they are not the same attitudes Jesus shows to his disciples and to the religious leaders who debate him. Not only are humility, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness proper attitudes but I also think the struggle for justice, equity, and peace should be counted as well. Those who seek to build a new social order of peace, justice, and compassion are the chosen, regardless of their religious affiliation. The chosen who accept Jesus' invitation struggle for justice, the chosen strive to ensure those living in poverty are cared for, the chosen feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and offer compassion and mercy to those imprisoned both literally and figuratively. These are the characteristics that Jesus taught and that we should emulate so we can be considered appropriately attired for the wedding banquet.

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Jesus tells this parable to a group of people who believed they were chosen but did not, could not, would not put on the proper "attire." They were not clothed in righteousness, and they believed Jesus' rules did not apply to them. Aren't there some in our religious institutions today who believe they are exceptions to the rules? Some who think if they contribute enough to the church treasury or show up to enough Sunday morning worship services that they have done "enough" and need not go any further for the kingdom. There are some in our world today who don't take Jesus' invitation seriously at all and would rather do their own thing, thinking that all that is required of them to enter the divine banquet hall is to be "good" but when looking through the lens of God's filter – only God is good, the rest of us must clothe ourselves in the righteousness and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ's invitation to the table. We can't get in without wearing the "wedding robe."