

Sermon: Proper Wedding Attire

10/11/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As my wife and her mom began planning our wedding day just over 13 years ago, it soon became clear to me that weddings in the Wilkins family are not private affairs. We were not going to be having one of those small, intimate weddings in which two people exchange vows, surrounded only by close family and friends. No, we would be planning something much closer to a family reunion, a time when friends and family from far and near would come together for food, fellowship, and, of course, a wedding. Yes, there were a few people who could not attend that day, citing previous commitments, travel, and health. But most of the 200-plus people that we invited—or should I say we and our parents invited?—were there alongside us, enjoying the festivities late into the night. There was never a question about where else they would be.

As I read today's Gospel lesson, I imagine that the king felt much the same. Ever since word of his son's engagement had spread, the king had spent considerable time preparing for the big day. Cakes had been sampled, entrees selected, flowers chosen, and invitations sent out. His son's wedding was set to be a lavish affair, a day that everyone would remember. True, none of his guests had returned their RSVP cards yet, but he was their king and his son the heir to the throne. Was there even a reason to wonder where else they would be?

On the morning of the wedding the king awoke, confident that his home would soon be filled with sounds of laughter and smells of smoked oxen and fatted calf. As the ceremony grew closer, though, he began to get more and more anxious. "Any second now," he repeated to himself, as he peered out the window, waiting for the front gates to open and people to begin streaming in. But no matter how many times he looked, they never did. For what seemed like an

eternity the king sat there, trying to remain patient, until finally he couldn't take it anymore. "You, slaves," he said, pointing at the people standing quietly in the corner, "go tell everyone I invited to come, for the wedding is about to begin." The slaves did as their king had commanded, but no one accompanied them back to their master's home. "Perhaps," the king thought to himself, "they just need a little more incentive. Go," he instructed another group of slaves, "and tell my long-awaited guests that the food has been prepared and the tables have been set. If there's one thing I know, it's that no one turns down free food, especially food as extravagant as this." Once again, he was proven wrong.

Some scholars, when asked why the guests refused to attend, have argued that it was because they didn't want to. Sure, they could have made the time, but they had better things to do. Apparently, they didn't consider it an honor or privilege to attend the wedding, even if it was for the king's son. So they disregarded each invitation that arrived, with some offering excuses like, "sorry, but I just have too much going on at work right now" and "sorry, but I just remembered something that I need to do at home." It was the equivalent of a girl saying, "sorry, but I need to wash my hair" after being asked out on a date. Yes, she might need to wash her hair, but that is not why she's saying no.

Other scholars have suggested that they refused the invitation for political reasons. By attending the wedding, each guest would have been expressing their loyalty to the king and to his son's right to the throne. Not attending was akin to insurrection, perhaps explaining why they later seized, mistreated, and killed the slaves. "What's the harm in throwing another log on the fire," we can imagine them thinking, "given what the king will surely do to us." In this light, we can better understand why the king responded as he did, directing his troops to kill the traitors and destroy their property and possessions. They needed to be held accountable, not just for

killing his slaves or refusing to attend his son's wedding, but for actively seeking to undermine his rule.

If the parable ended here, we would have the makings of quite the fire-and-brimstone sermon. "How many of us have heard the call of our God and King," I might preach, "who offers us forgiveness of our sins through his Son, Jesus Christ, and have refused to listen? How many of us have been like the Israelites and made for ourselves idols, idols like money, power, and prestige, even after all that God has done for us? Repent and believe. Stop refusing God's invitation and turn your life over to Christ, or you will suffer the consequences. And to all you who call yourselves Christians, God has heard your excuses. God remembers that time you were too tired to attend worship, or went fishing instead, or didn't want to miss kickoff at noon, or needed to get ready for a family dinner. Do you really think that you are any more likely to attend the heavenly banquet? Repent and believe, or you too will suffer the consequences."

But the parable does not end here, does it? Instead, we hear how the king sent out his slaves once more, this time instructing them to invite everyone they might meet. It didn't matter whether they were good or bad, male or female, Gentile or Jew, Democrat or Republican, everyone was to be invited. And so the wedding hall was filled, revealing the generosity of the King. "How great is our God and King," I might preach in a different sermon, "for while none of us deserve to feast at the heavenly banquet, we have all been invited. All that God asks is that we come as we are." Except that is not quite right either. Because, while it is true that the King did invite everyone, he still expected that they would dress for the occasion. And for the one man who did not put on his wedding robe, the consequences were dire.

A few years ago I went out to lunch with two of the people who helped start my Sunday school class. Both of them were my age and had grown up within the church. They also worked

for the oil industry in downtown Dallas. As I got dressed that morning, I figured that we would not be eating at one of the local taco shops or burger joints, so I put on slacks, a dress shirt, and a tie, while leaving my suit coat at home. Where we ended up eating was the restaurant operated by the Dallas Petroleum Club, one of the most exclusive clubs in the nation, in which I soon learned they were both members. In that moment, I felt woefully underdressed for the occasion, and would have done almost anything to have my suit coat hanging around my shoulders, rather than in my closet at home. When I first read today's Gospel lesson, I imagined a similar scenario. "Perhaps," I thought to myself, "the man was working in the fields or in a local shop when the slave arrived, inviting him to the wedding. With no time to delay—after all, the food was already cooked and the band was already playing—he immediately set off for the wedding. It was a simple misunderstanding, one which he would not make again. Surely, being bound and thrown out into the darkness was an overreaction; one which I'm glad didn't happen to me at the Dallas Petroleum Club." But then I began to wonder, why was wearing the wedding robe so important to the king, and why did no one else forget theirs?

For the king, not wearing a wedding robe was a demonstration of contempt for the wedding. It was a refusal to join in the king's rejoicing. Yes, the man was present, eating the food and enjoying the festivities, something that the earlier invited guests had refused to do. But he was not participating in the joy of the feast. The reason why the king bound the man and threw him out was because his actions revealed the state of his heart. The man was not just guilty of a simple misunderstanding. Rather, he had gone to the wedding well aware of the expectations. He had seen the sticker on the door saying, "no shirt, no shoes, no wedding robe, no service," and decided to enter anyways. So when confronted by the king, he was rendered speechless, because there was nothing for him to say.

Our God and King does not just expect us to show up at the heavenly banquet.

Throughout Scripture, we hear the call that God has placed on each of our lives. We hear how God has given us the Ten Commandments, so that we might know how to live. So that we might demonstrate the state of our hearts through our actions, much like the Israelites did when they made that golden calf. We hear Jesus' teachings, like how we are called to love God with our entire heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, and that we demonstrate our love of God and neighbor when do things like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and in prison. And we witness what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus when we hear of the faith and perseverance of the prophets, the preaching and persecution of the apostles, and the death and resurrection of our Lord, the Son of our God and King. We all know the expectations. We know what God desires that we wear: clothes that reflect our commitment to following God. Which is why I can't help but wonder: when that day comes and I find myself at the heavenly banquet, what will I be wearing? Will I be, once again, missing my suit coat? Or, will I find myself dressed for the occasion and be welcomed for eternity?

The thing that makes fire-and-brimstone sermons, like the one I briefly preached a few minutes ago, so uncomfortable is that deep down, while we may disagree with the method, we know that there is truth in the message. We know that, while our God and King has graciously invited each one of us, there are times when we have turned the invitation down. We know that there are times when have we gone without first putting on our wedding robe, not due to a simple misunderstanding, but because we have chosen not to. We know that we have sinned and deserve to be held accountable for our actions. And we know that, as Jesus proclaims at the end of today's Gospel lesson, "many are called, but few are chosen."

God has given each one of us the opportunity to respond to God's grace and spend eternity worshiping our God and King. Truly, our God is worthy of our thanks and praise. May we spend this and every day, not just hoping and praying to be among the chosen, but seeking to be people whose lives demonstrate the depth of our faith, so that when that day comes, God might look upon us and our choice of dress, and say, "welcome, I've been waiting for you, and I'm so glad you're finally here." Amen.