

Voice A: Jesus spoke to the people again in parables.  
 Voice B: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.  
 Voice A: He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come,  
 Voice B: but they refused to come.  
 Voice A: They refused to come.  
 Voice B: They refused to come.  
 Voice A: Then he sent some more servants and said,  
 Voice B: Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: 'My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'  
 Voice A: But they paid no attention,  
 Voice B: they paid no attention,  
 Voice A: they paid no attention and went off—  
 one to his field, another to his business.  
 Voice B: The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.  
 BOTH: THE KING WAS ENRAGED.  
 Voice B: He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.  
 Then he said to his servants,  
 Voice A: 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'  
 Voice B: So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.  
 Voice A: But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there...  
 BOTH: WHO WAS NOT WEARING WEDDING CLOTHES.  
 Voice B: (angrily) 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?'  
 Voice A: The man was speechless.  
 Voice B: Then the king told the attendants,  
 Voice A: 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'  
 BOTH: FOR MANY ARE INVITED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN.

### **-New International Version**

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“Israel” literally translated means “He who wrestles.” This evokes a memory of Jacob’s (a.k.a. Israel’s) all night wrestling match for a blessing. It is often in wrestling with scripture and with God that we yield the blessing of growth in faith. And here at St. A’s we are seeking to be a community nurturing growth in Christian faith. So... are you ready to step into the ring with me and wrestle with Matthew’s rendition of the wedding banquet parable?

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I think most of us, if we're familiar with this story at all, know it as Luke tells it. And Luke's story reads very differently than does Matthew's. It's tempting, actually, to jump out of Matthew and into Luke, but we'd miss our opportunity to wrestle, and a great opportunity for us to see the way that each Gospel writer puts their own spin on things. The way that Matthew tells this story that Jesus told... well, it's very Matthew. Because we've been spending so much time with this book, perhaps you can recognize it as properly belonging to this Gospel— when he mentions the gathering in of the good and the bad to the party that sounds a lot like that mixed field of weeds and wheat, doesn't it? And that pithy and weighty one-liner at the end— many are invited, but few are chosen (gulp.)— doesn't that sound like so many of the last lines we've had tagged onto parables and teachings throughout this book— it's rather like “And the Father will do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from you heart.” Gulp.

Matthew is prone to extremes— I once heard a scholar point to the screamingly bold tones Matthew brings to his writing, to the screaming intensity of this Gospel. Matthew is also prone to turning parables into allegories. Ok, don't glaze over. Stay with me. Jesus taught in parables. Here's a great definition of a parable: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” (C.H. Dodd quoted in Boring and Craddock, 121) Parables were a teaching tool intended to challenge those who hear them to respond; they were not tight containers for pre-packaged meaning— in fact, as two scholars put it “they are open-ended narrative metaphors that generate new meaning in new situations.” (Boring and Craddock, 121). This is not to say that they can mean absolutely anything, but hearers have to wrestle with them and actively participate in deciding what they mean, and what response is appropriate. Parables often pluck images and experiences from the familiar world of the hearer, but then offer a completely new angle on the familiar that challenges everyday expectations. They are stories that tease us into active thought.

Allegories, in contrast, are stories in which every element is a symbol for something else— where the material world is code for the spiritual world. If a story is an allegory the meaning is locked in the symbols and needs to be decoded. You might wrestle with an allegory; you might

find it to be a bit of a tease into thought, but it's very different than a parable. The meaning is more fixed, less open and free.

Matthew has definitely converted this parable into an allegory. As best as scholars can tell, in the original story that Jesus told, the man throwing the party in the story was just a man, not a king, and it was a feast, but not precisely a wedding banquet. But by making the man a king— he is more clearly a symbol of God (head of kingdom of heaven, a crucial concept in Matthew's Gospel), and by making the party one thrown for the son, it enters in a character who symbolizes Jesus. And the feast itself is a symbol of the promised banquet at the end of time. The first servants sent out symbolize prophets who carry God's invitational message. Those who refuse to respond to the message symbolize those within Israel who did not listen to the prophets. The second set of servants sent out symbolize the early Christian missionaries or prophets. The introduction of violence evokes the fate of many prophets and early Christian missionary witnesses. The final sending of servants to gather in anybody and everybody represents the mission to the Gentiles, beyond Israel. The whole last part of the story, with the calling out of one inappropriately dressed... this is all pure Matthew. There is no evidence it was in Jesus' original story. It would seem that "wedding robes" in Matthew's allegorical imagination symbolize a right spiritual attitude and commitment— new clothing is a common metaphor for the Christian life in the New Testament.

But if you're anything like me, accessing these symbolic meanings, doesn't remove the offense of this story. The king seems like a petulant jerk— and he represents God? No, thank you. The people standing in for Israel are represented in the harshest of terms. The violence in the story is all out of proportion and stomach turning. And the idea that someone dragged in off the street to fill up a party room would then be cast into darkness and eternal suffering for not wearing the right clothes? Are you wrestling yet? Blech. And to wrap it all up with the tag line, "Many are invited, but few are chosen" on the heels of one of Matthew's favorite images of the weeping and gnashing of teeth, this invites an existential dread, a sense that many are doomed. Isn't the Gospel supposed to be good news?

Matthew doesn't let us just sit comfortably with our preferred theologies. Matthew with his screaming boldness, his extremes, his intensity... he disturbs us. Again and again throughout his

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Gospel he offers, as one scholar puts it, a profound dialectic— between the mind-stretching magnitude of the grace of God and the accountability of the recipients of that grace (Koester, Working Preacher Podcast). We saw this in his rendering of the parable of the unforgiving servant, didn't we? A massive debt, an unbelievably large debt, is completely forgiven, but that forgiveness is then retracted when the one forgiven fails to forgive another. The magnitude of grace, the weight of accountability. Here the magnitude of grace is evoked with the invitation to an elaborate feast, to a glorious party. The refusal of this invitation through indifference or violence outrages God because the rejection of lavish grace is outrageous. Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you come to a banquet set for you? This is part of where the story turns to accountability. I once heard someone say that if grace becomes encouragement of contempt or rejection then grace is no longer grace. The magnitude of grace is evoked even more powerfully by the wide open invitation being thrown out to EVERYBODY, the good and the bad... but accountability swings back in when it is suggested that it is not enough to just show up, but it matters how you show up. We might object on both ends of this dialectic— everybody, Jesus? Really? Can't we say that some are just too bad to be invited in the first place? I think all of us have people we'd prefer God not to invite... But the God we meet in Matthew welcomes all without precondition or pre-requisite. But the God in Matthew also expects that when you respond to this invitation it will change you, that you will let your life be shaped by having the honor of being included in the banquet, that you will let your life show your gratitude for the graciousness of the invitation. And we might object here too. This just seems so judgy and harsh. God is love, right? God welcomes us just as we are, without one plea, right? Who cares what I'm wearing?

The scholar who helped me to see this dialectic says that when we start saying "No, no..." to Matthew, we're back in the game, we've found a way to be teased into asking what it means to take seriously the magnitude of God's grace. The story is ridiculous—servants are killed for carrying a party invitation? The king burns down his own city and lets the wedding feast grow cold in the meantime? And someone is thrown out and punished for not wearing the right clothes? Really? We are being poked and prodded to wake up and realize the glorious feast that

has been prepared and that this feast is not just for us but for everybody and that showing up to this feast is meant to change us.

There is good news for us in the message that God has a set a banquet for everyone and that the grace of this invitation has transforming power. We might be afraid of the accountability — we might feel like we all have too much on our plates already to be asked to open ourselves to be radically changed. Change is scary. But that's what it means to be a disciple of Christ, it means that you will let the Spirit of Christ work on you to change you so that you might more fully witness to the world as to the difference that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus makes.

As one scholar puts it, "Indeed, it is not enough anymore to call yourself a follower of Christ and then act as if you were sound asleep during the Sermon on the Mount. It is not enough to pledge allegiance to church membership without then vowing to live out that chosenness in the world. It is not enough to say you are a "Christian" and then stay silent when life, liberty, and love are in jeopardy..." She goes on to wonder "if the decline of mainline Protestantism is because we have been satisfied with just getting people in the pews and once we get them there, we are so happy they showed up that we have forgotten that accountability comes with discipleship. I wonder if people aren't coming to church because our preaching perpetuates a passive faith. I wonder if a Christianity that is not Evangelicalism has lost its voice in the public sphere because we have caved to the idolatry of maintaining the status quo. In other words, 'Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel.'" She concludes "What not to wear? Complacency, conformity, and any kind of garb that is content with the way things are. What should we wear, so that the whole of the world can see who we are and what we are about? The kind of compassion, birthed by God's own righteousness, that cannot, anymore, leave things the way they are." (Karoline Lewis)

Taking seriously the magnitude of grace means letting our hearts be blown wide open, so that we will invite anybody and everybody to join the feast, it means growing in compassion so that barriers and divisions fall away, it means making space... wrestling our way to blessing, after blessing, after blessing...

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Sources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004.

Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, *I Love to Tell the Story: Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary Podcast*, "The Wedding Banquet," Episode 355, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1118](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1118)

Karoline Lewis, "What Not to Wear," Sunday, October 8, 2017, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4980>