

Sermon Title: *Underdressed*

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.’

This morning we close out our series on the kingdom of God – this thing that Jesus talked more about than anything else in scripture. And I probably should have done this on the first week of this series, but I want to be a bit more explicit here about this concept: *the kingdom of God* (in Matthew's gospel, the kingdom of Heaven).

This is not just a phrase that Jesus happens upon – a phrase he tries out and ends up liking – this is a very intentional phrase that is suppose to give us pause; it is supposed to make us think about who is our king and in whose kingdom do we live? And while I generally don't like to be too dualistic, too black and white – it is either this way or that way, type of thinking – I believe that this is the type of thinking and imagery that Jesus is seeking to elicit in choosing the phrase *the kingdom of God*. It might seem like an odd phrase to us, *the kingdom of God*, at a time where we have presidents and prime ministers and live in a democracy, but this is no accidental phrase – Jesus didn't just think it sounded good in Aramaic – it was a deliberate and thought-provoking choice.

For Jesus' listeners it would have been asking them: is Cesar your Lord or is God your Lord? Is your final allegiance as a citizen of Rome or as a citizen of God's kingdom?



- The kingdom of the world seeks peace by a sword – keeping peace through violence and having the largest military.



The kingdom of God seeks peace through a cross – by self-sacrificially laying down one's life for others; not saving thousands of lives by taking hundreds of lives, but saving lives by never regarding our own lives as more valuable than another.

- The kingdom of God seeks a lasting peace through reconciliation and forgiveness



The kingdom of the world seeks a lasting peace through the passing down the ways of intimidation and fear.

- The kingdom of the world values the flourishing of one nation or people group



The kingdom of God seeks the flourishing of all people and all life

- The kingdom of the world seeks riches and to be served



The kingdom of God seeks to serve without worry of recognition.

- The kingdom of the world builds walls that divide us into groups and categories



The kingdom of God seeks to tear down those dividing walls so that all might have life, and have it abundantly

- The kingdom of the world longs for influence at the top



The kingdom of God seeks an audience with those who have not been valued or listened to; it seeks an audience with the victims of power, to hear from the victims of abuse and our exploitative systems

- And let there be no doubt, both kingdoms ask for our allegiance.

A Christian Pledge of Allegiance

*I pledge allegiance to Jesus
Christ,
And to God's kingdom for
which he died—
One Spirit-led people the
world over,
indivisible,
With love and justice for all.*

The American Pledge of Allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the
flag,
Of the United States of
America —
And to the republic for
which it stands, one
nation under God,
indivisible, with liberty
and justice for all

This “Christian Pledge of Allegiance”¹ was written by two Mennonite seminary professors shortly after the start of the 2nd Iraq war when many Mennonite congregations were releasing their peace-witness in order to support our military strategy.

So, this is what Jesus is doing in choosing the phrase *the kingdom of God*, asking us, “who do we serve?” and “who is our Lord?”

¹ This “Christian Pledge” appeared in the August 2004 edition of *The Mennonite*, it was drafted by June Alliman Yoder and J. Nelson Kraybill



At its basic level, this is the imagery that we are to consider each time we hear Jesus use these words, *the kingdom of God*; all the other parables and teachings on the kingdom of God build upon this basic idea of where does our citizenship lie.²

And of course this is why we say things like, “Christianity works best from the margins”, because this is not a popular take on Jesus and the kingdom of God – but when nation and the ways of Jesus are fused – I think history has shown us, that it is not good for the ways of Christ and the flourishing of all life. As the freed slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass put it, “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt and wicked.”³

² These concepts of the kingdom of God come from a variety of places and learning: *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder, *The Upside Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill, and *The Myth of a Christian Nation* by Greg Boyd.

³ The quote continues, “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. I can find no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”

This is not to seek to unfairly criticize our own country more than any other country – only to acknowledge that whenever *Nation-State* and *the Ways of Christ* are fused and confused – it is always the ways of Christ that suffer; it is always the name of God that is used to justify horrible acts brutality and fear, it is not the name of the Nation-State used to justify acts of loving kindness.

Ancient Israel was, in fact, called to be a “nation under God” in a unique way. It was supposed to be a unique people who lived by a different set of rules and laws – governed by God and the laws of love – it was supposed to be a peculiar and holy nation, so much so that other nations of the world would look to them and say, “what is it that is so different about them – how can they live this way, at peace with one another and their neighbors, forgiving each other’s debts and taking care of each who has need – caring for even the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner.”

That was Israel’s calling, to be such a nation (under God) that through them all the nations of the world would be blessed. God was supposed to be Israel’s king, and moreover, most of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries wanted to “Make Israel Great Again”, they wanted to take back Israel from the hand of the Romans – they wanted to reestablish Israel as a great and powerful nation, this is precisely why they continually tried to fit Jesus into the mold of a political messiah.⁴

And this is why Jesus had to keep talking about *the kingdom of God*, to say, “this is not why I came – this is not what I am here for – I did not come to make Israel Great Again, but to

⁴ Greg Boyd offers this perspective in the chapter “Taking American Back for God” in *Myth of a Christian Nation*.

reconcile the whole world; I did not come to put Israel first, I came for all people. I came because of God's kingdom, not this kingdom.”

Some argue that Jesus did not set up an earthly political kingdom because he did not have the power or ability. But I believe it was a constant and consistent choice that he made over and over again – in fact, from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus made this conscious decision – it was one of the temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness before beginning his earthly ministry. If you recall that story, as Jesus is baptized, he goes into the wilderness for 40 days of prayer, fasting and preparation. The gospels tell us that during that time, in his weakened state, the tempter came to him offering him (in good story-telling fashion) three things. In one of these temptations, he was shown the kingdoms of the world, that he could have all those kingdoms – that he could rule all of those kingdoms. To which he declined, saying “Worship the Lord your God, and serve God only.”⁵

And so now that I have used most of my sermon time to do a re-introduction to *the kingdom of God*, a quick look at this parable of Jesus, that we have likely forgotten about – this odd and difficult parable of “the wedding feast.”

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ Luke 4:5-8.

The kingdom of God is like a great wedding feast⁶. The host, no doubt the father of the bride, has invited his best friends, but none came. Likely they are fast, busy people and they said, “Oh no, not another dinner party.” The host is furious. The table was already set. He had gone to a lot of expense. The wine was poured and the candles were already burning. He is not going to waste what he has done. He sends his staff into the streets, to bring in all kinds of strangers to celebrate. He makes them welcome. As we usually tell the story, it is a narrative of generous inclusiveness. It is an elaborate allegory with God as the host; God sends out the prophets who are rejected, laughed at, and some even killed. Now, says the parable, God is doing a new thing and all are invited. God’s love is unqualified – all are welcome. No entry examination, no visa needed.

At least in the gospels of Luke & Thomas, this is how the story is told. But in the Gospel of Matthew there is the addition of verses 11-13 that are not present in Luke’s story. The host was mingling among his new guests who had come in off the street. Likely the host is pretty pleased with himself and his generosity. But then he notices one guest was not wearing a wedding robe. He was not appropriately dressed, like he did not know this was a wedding, demeaning this great celebration. The host said to him, “Friend.” It was not a friendly greeting, more like “Mister”, or “Excuse me, sir.” How did you get in here without being properly dressed? The man is speechless, because he had just walked in as invited. And the host has him kicked out of the party, out into the darkness.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann offers this retelling in “A God who Gives Wildly... and then Insists,” The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann.

Some scholars say that wedding hosts provided garments for their guests in those days, the same way some fancy restaurants keep a spare jacket and tie on hand for dinner guests who show up in shirt sleeves. If that was the case, then the spotlight shifts from the king to the guest. Why did he refuse the robe that was offered him? What made him think he could come as he was to such an auspicious feast without being noticed?⁷

The wedding robe, like everything else in this story, has a deeper meaning. It is not just a fancy outfit. It is a whole way of life – one that honors the king, one that recognizes the privilege of being called into his presence, even if the invitation arrives at the last minute. The underdressed guest’s mistake was not that he showed-up in shorts, it was that he showed up short on love, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and righteousness.⁸

This is a very odd turn to a lovely metaphor/parable. It is unexpected to have the host act this way after his gesture of inclusiveness, of inviting in all people, both “good and bad” as the story says. Thought part of me wonders, in this particular metaphor/parable, what does the host expect – if you invite everyone, you have to lower your expectations of people’s appearance, of their behavior.

But, then again, perhaps this is the beautiful part of God’s inclusiveness, it sees the best in everyone and wants everyone to utilize their gifts – it sees all people as children of God with limitless potential – so that no person, no matter how hard or difficult their past, is not expected to participate in and further the kingdom of God. You see, with this God, we cannot be an

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Wedding Dress” in *Home By Another Way*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

innocent bystander or passive observer who watches with fascination and indifference as God works things out. You cannot act as though God's kingdom has nothing to do with you, with us. God is not looking for warm bodies to fill seats – the end is not larger church buildings and more butts in the seats – the end is the kingdom of God.

And so, the question for citizens of God's kingdom, is not, "how can we get others to view the world as we do?" Nor is the question, "how do we grow our church?" The question is: *How do we take up the cross for the world? How do we best communicate to others their unsurpassable worth and value before God? How do we serve and wash the feet of those pushed to the margins?*

And so, what clothes must we put on if we are to wash the world's feet, one smelly toe at a time? They will be clothes made from the whole fabric of our lives, using the patterns God has given us – patterns of justice, forgiveness, peace, mercy, and humble service. May we be such a people. Amen.

Sending Blessing

And now as you go from this place, may the God of all life go with you,

Renewing us in our belief that we have been unequivocally invited to the banquet table in God's kingdom, and reminding us that a seat at the table comes with expectations – the expectation of a life lived in order that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Go in peace. Amen.