

Sermon: Parable of the Wedding Banquet

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 11, 2026)

There is something terribly wrong in this kingdom. A king puts together a wedding banquet for his son. Instead of attending gleefully and wholeheartedly as honoured guests, the invited would not come. Again the king sends out his servants to plead his case, “Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” All that is missing in this plead was a ‘please’, a ‘pretty please?’

Yet, his subjects, the A-listers, would not come. They made light of it, they made excuses, some went away to take care of their own business, some seized the messengers, mistreated them and killed them. In a fit of anger, the king sent his troops to slaughter those ungrateful murderers, in righteous indignation no doubt, and then indiscriminately razed their city to the ground. Like I said, there is something terribly wrong with this kingdom. Yet, this is the kingdom that Jesus compares to as the Kingdom of God! What is going on? Is this a joke? Unfortunately, it is not.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, for the past number of weeks, we have been meditating on parables of Jesus in Matthew. Many of them were about vineyards—an allusion to either the house of Israel, the Church, or ultimately to the Kingdom of God. We have seen these parables taking on increasingly ominous tone, as in last week when the son of the vineyard owner was killed by wicket tenants, who thought mistakenly that by killing the heir, they would inherit the vineyard. We know these parables were told by Jesus in Jerusalem, as he engaged in increasingly bitter theological debates with the religious authorities of his days. We know how those debates would eventually end, with those authorities so enraged that they would ally with Rome to nail Jesus to the cross. We also know that alliance did not end so well for the Jews, as Rome eventually turned on Jerusalem and raze it to the ground in 70 AD. We know that Matthew, the Gospel, was written in the smouldering ruin of that reality. It doesn’t explain the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, merely laying out the context of the time as it was penned down.

A long line of Christian biblical interpretation has the king as God, the son / bridegroom as Jesus, the wedding banquet as the Messianic feast of the end-time, the rejected servant as Old Testament prophets, and the

ungrateful A-list guests as the Jewish people of Jesus's day. The B-listers who come off the streets to fill the banquet hall, whether good or bad, are us, the gentiles. But before we all get comfortable, snug and cozy, feasting on fine wine and caviar while the rest of the world burns, something else goes terribly wrong during the banquet.

One particular guest was without a wedding robe. The king took notice of him, called him out and sent him out, into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I don't know how anyone could've expected that unfortunate sap, just some random dude off the street, be in the position to afford a wedding robe, let alone to have one ready just in case the king invites him to a banquet. He could hardly afford this week's grocery bill, and just enough to pay next month's rent. I don't know why any king could not have overlooked the shortcoming of just one dude, and to rejoice with myriad of others who were dressed surprisingly appropriate. There is no grace, there is no second chance, and the tagline of this parable, as parables of Jesus usually have, is "For many are called, but few are chosen." The exclusive nature of this wedding banquet cannot be papered over.

What do we make of this wedding banquet? Would you be comfortable, eating and drinking in the midst of a smouldering ruin where hundreds and thousands were slaughtered for the refusal of a few ungrateful A-listers? Would you cheer the king for throwing out the bum who could not follow the proper dress code?

If your answer is yes to both, I don't know what to say to you. Maybe this sermon is just not for you. Maybe you can find another minister who could gleefully preach a violence-filled text, and call that faith. Maybe you could find another church which delights in throwing bums out onto streets for not dressing the Sunday's best. Maybe, just maybe you could find an expression of the Christian faith that is militant, violent and exclusive—one does not have to look too far south to see those claiming to be Christians... delighting in blowing up supposedly drug traffickers without due process, deporting undocumented migrants without mercy, planning to live-stream the execution of a renegade soldier. If that is your cup of tea, have at it, it's just not me.

For the rest of us the more civilized followers of Jesus, how do we make sense of this Parable of the Wedding Banquet? How do we understand the Kingdom of God to be? And for that matters, who do we think God is? Allow me to lay out three points:

First of all, this Parable of the Wedding Banquet seems to hinge on what our understanding of ‘the wedding robe’ to be, and it has proven to be troubling for every generation of interpreters.

Augustin saw it as holy living, and most of all as love. He finds support in Paul’s writing in Colossians, particularly in 3:12-13, “*Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*” And in summation the following verse, “*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*” (v.14) In such a reading, fruitfulness of one’s faithful life is the key. Just like the previous parable, God replaces those who were not fruitful with those who are.

Luther, on the other hands, who had built his theology against work-righteousness, is horrified and derided those who saw the wedding robe as anything other than faith. Unsurprisingly, faith to Luther is the key to the Kingdom of God. Since faith is also a gift from God, then it stands to reason the king in this story is and ought to be the one who provides the wedding robe to his guests.

Calvin calls the debate over the wedding robe—is it faith or is it holy life?—as a useless controversy, for “faith cannot be separated from good works, nor do good works proceed from any other source than from faith.” For Calvin, he prefers to think of the wedding robe as ‘putting on Christ’, which finds the Scriptural support in Paul’s letters, in Romans 13:14, “*Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*”; and Galatians 3:27, “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*” By such reading, the wedding guest who is cast into outer darkness receives this judgement because he has refused to be clothed with Christ. And it is only ‘in Christ’ do we have in God the heavenly Father who is not a just righteous judge, who waits for us outside the door, who sees us from afar, who embraces us in our tattered clothes, who clothes us with the finest robe, who sets a banquet before us, and feast with us.

Second of all, there is another version of this parable, in the Gospel Luke 14:15-24. In that version, Jesus wasn’t facing imminent execution on the cross, he was actually an invited dinner guest at the house of a Pharisees. In that version, the ungrateful A-listers weren’t slaughtered, there was no dress code for the B-listers who were described as “the poor,

the crippled, the blind, and the lame". No one was thrown out, the inclusive and joyful nature of that feast, that kingdom was unmistakable.

I very much like that version. That is how I see the Kingdom of God, that is the wedding banquet of the Lamb I want, I look forward to celebrate. So why two versions of this parable? Perhaps we should read the Matthew version as a hyperbolic, as what it wasn't, what it couldn't, in order for us to appreciate and to give thanks to what is and what could.

Perhaps the Matthew version is a warning to us all, to reflect on our own faith, our own practices of faith. Do we always say 'yes' to God, to God's gracious invitation to faith? Or do we find excuses to go our own ways? Are you truly inviting and welcoming of all through the door of the church? Have we prepared our own robes, the ones befitting of the wedding banquet of the Lamb?

Finally, parables are supposed to invoke critical responses from us, but it is the life and ministry of Jesus that we ought to emulate. When it comes to the eschatological feast in the Kingdom of God, the meals that Jesus shares with tax collectors and sinners, and especially his Last Supper with his disciples, those are the meals that symbolized what life in God's kingdom will be like.

I had mentioned earlier about the Gospel of Matthew being written in the context of destruction of Jerusalem. It may be that Matthew himself was one of the few remaining who still remember what it was like to sit at those tables with Jesus—how perilous was the journey that led them to that upper room, how precious the memory as Jesus commands all his followers 'do this in remembrance of me'.

It may be that brief moment of grace of that last shared meal was sufficient—sufficient for followers of Jesus to endure. Even as the threat of violence and destruction swirl around them, even as embers of hope flicker ever so dimly, the followers of Jesus shall endure in the memory and the promise of: We will feast again.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, let this Parable of the Wedding Banquet evoke in us a heart of gratitude. Let it be a reminder to us to 'put on Christ' and never take it off. Most importantly, let it rekindle in us the memory and the hope that, yes, we shall indeed feast against with Christ in paradise.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**