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### **The wedding banquet that matters.**

A number of years ago, I was attending a technical conference in Singapore. I was a professor of Computer Science. I happened to be wandering around the city one evening. The center of the city is extremely modern with a number of tall buildings. I went into a building that wasn't exactly a skyscraper, but I thought would be tall enough to see the skyline if I could get up on the roof. The front doors were open, and people were coming and going. I went in, climbed about twenty flights of stairs, and did indeed find a way to get onto the roof. The view was stunning. I was up there for about an hour before deciding to head down. I went from the roof back into the stairway. It was then that I noticed that the lights in the stairway were very dim. They had been quite bright when I had ascended the stairs. I concluded that the building had closed while I was on the roof. I went down one flight, and just to make sure I wasn't going to be trapped in the stairwell, I tried the door to the top floor. The door was locked. I couldn't get out of the stairwell. I went down another flight and tried the door. Locked. I tried the next couple of floors. The doors were locked. It seemed that I was

indeed locked in the stairwell. My heart pounding, I continued down, floor after floor, and indeed, all of the doors were locked. Eventually, I made it all the way to the ground floor – and that door was locked. Night was falling and I was apparently locked in this building. I'll get back to this.

I'd like to change the subject – and talk about a parable. Probably all of us are familiar with it, but there's something in it that's a bit odd. Here it is from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the New Living Translation:

*Jesus also told them other parables. He said, <sup>2</sup>“The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. <sup>3</sup>When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come!*

*<sup>4</sup>“So he sent other servants to tell them, ‘The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!’ <sup>5</sup>But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. <sup>6</sup>Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them.*

*<sup>7</sup>“The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. <sup>8</sup>And he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor. <sup>9</sup>Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ <sup>10</sup>So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.*

*<sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn't wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. <sup>12</sup>‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

*<sup>14</sup>“For many are called, but few are chosen.”*

A common interpretation of this parable is that it is an allegory in which a wedding represents judgement day, either the final day of judgement when the earth ceases to exist or the personal judgement day for each of us. Seeing the wedding day as the final judgement of all of humanity is the more common interpretation. The people who are invited first but won't come represent folks who were supposed to be rich, not just with money, but also rich in spirit – people who have lived godly lives. The king who is preparing the wedding banquet represents God. The wedding banquet stands for the site of the final judgement, when all believers stand before God. The king sends servants to go out and invite people to this wedding ceremony; this parallels the way in which all people will someday be invited to final judgement – whether they like it or not. In the wedding story, some of the invited guests attack and kill the servants who are simply trying to get them to come to a wedding ceremony. Some scholars feel that the servants who go out to collect the guests represent the prophets of the Old Testament. And when they are attacked in this story, it is a reference to the mistreatment and rejection that the prophets of the Old Testament often faced from their own people. When the king, who is God, orders that the killers' towns to be burned in retaliation, it is said to be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, something that some felt was a punishment from God.

This punishment was a result of powerful religious leaders of Jesus' day rejecting the message of Jesus. More relevant to us, when the invited guests won't come to the wedding, that is, when those who are invited to live with God for eternity turn out to be ungodly and undeserving of salvation, the king tells his servants to invite common people. Likewise, God invites all of us regular Christians to be with him for all of eternity, even though we don't propret to be the most godly people. We are modest and we are saved. Others, who presented themselves to the world as powerful people deserving of adulation turn out to be great sinners and hypocritical believers - and are condemned for eternity.

Notice that the good and the bad are invited; indeed, some of us are deserving of salvation and some are not. Some scholars have suggested that more precisely, the people being rejected by God are not just powerful people who lived selfish, sinful lives. The idea is that there are members of the church, people who claim to follow Christ in their daily lives, who are frauds, no better than those who openly reject Jesus and only live for money, power, and fame.

There is an odd aspect to this story about judgment, and it relates to this issue of fraudulent believers. Why would the king reject a man who perhaps doesn't own decent clothes? Even if he has money, what's wrong with not dressing fancy? The servants were told to go out and get anyone they could find.

Does God expect us to have the money to buy fancy clothes and then dress up like we're important so that we can be saved? Remember that this is an allegory. Clean, fine garments refer to good moral values, i.e., living the way God wants us to. The man with bad clothes is really a man who has rejected the teachings of Jesus, despite claiming that he is a true believer. He showed up for judgement with the righteous, but he is not righteous.

What does this all mean? Modern believers should care about this parable.

I work as a hospital chaplain a couple days a week. Visiting extremely ill people or their family members can be extremely compelling. One woman was in her forties and was dying from a cancer that had spread throughout her body. She was receiving treatment, not to be cured, but to extend her life as much as possible. She had a daughter, a girl around sixteen, and this woman told me that her only reason for continuing treatment was to live long enough to be at her daughter's wedding someday. My job as a chaplain is mostly to listen. I offer empathetic support. I affirmed this woman's willingness to go through torturous treatments for the sake of seeing her daughter finish growing up and then get married. But it might not happen, this woman said to me. She said: they tell me that I might not make it, that they'll do the best they can, but I need to be prepared to not be alive when my daughter gets married.

Now, as a chaplain in a non-religious hospital in a town that's somewhat hostile to Christians, I must be careful to never act like a Christian pastor. I serve all people, and only if they bring up the topic of faith do I start talking about God. It also helps if someone has stated that they are Christian on their electronic admission form. Since this woman had not stated when she was admitted to the hospital or when I first began talking to her that she followed any particular faith practice, I could only listen and offer emotional support. That's fine. It's important to me as a chaplain to respect the beliefs of all people. But then she asked me if I happened to be a pastor of a church. I told her that I am a United Methodist reverend, and that yes, I serve a church. Then she said that she was a Christian. She said that she was okay with dying, but that she was afraid that her daughter would subconsciously blame her for not sticking around to see her finish school and then get married. I suggested that she talk to her daughter about this. I said she should tell your daughter that she loves her very much and that she does want to be there for her, but that you might not be able to. I suggested that she tell her daughter that even if she isn't at the wedding, she'll be with God – and she'll be watching the day her daughter is married. I continued talking to this woman for a while. She asked me to pray with her. I prayed for healing if that was at all possible, and if healing was not part of God's plan, then I asked God

that her transition to an eternal life be free of anxiety and be peaceful, and that her daughter would one day feel her mother's presence the day she is married.

I'd like to get back to that stairwell I was trapped in in Singapore. When I got to the ground floor, that door was locked too, but there was a tiny glass window in the door. I peered through it – and I saw that there was a huge event going on - some kind of banquet. I banged on the door and yelled out. It took a while for someone to notice me, but finally, a man opened the door. Like all the other people at the banquet, he was an ethnic Chinese and dressed very fancily. It turned out to be a Christian wedding dinner. I was embarrassed, and as I was trying to quietly slip through the large, crowded banquet room and out the door, someone touched me on the arm. A woman talked to me in very good English. She said that she was the mother of the bride, and that I was invited to sit down and have dinner. We're Christians, she said. I told her that I appreciated the offer, but –. She interrupted me, saying that she would really like it if I would sit down and eat. I wasn't exactly dressed for a wedding. I was wearing wrinkled cotton pants and an old tee shirt. I was no better dressed than the guy who was sent out to weep and gnash. But I was hungry. And God doesn't actually care how we dress. The clothes on that man in the banquet are a metaphor. So, I sat down and ate. I had a great meal, met the bride and groom, and went home late.

It was very nice being asked to a wedding party. But that's not the wedding party that's going to be the important one. And the woman who was going to miss her daughter's wedding – well, I told her the same thing. I read this parable to her. I told her about the allegory in it, about the wedding party that will happen on judgement day. I told her that she would make the wedding that was the most important one, and that she would be just fine. This woman squeezed my hand and thanked me for spending time with her. I have no idea if she is still alive. When you are a chaplain, you are given the extreme privilege of stepping into someone's life at a critical moment, and then, you step away and never interact with them again. After a while, the faces and the names become a blur.

But that woman who wanted to live to see her daughter get married? If I forget her, I'll see her again – at that wedding banquet at the end of time.

This parable has even more meaning for the modern believer, and in fact, it tells us a lot about what our goals should be as people of faith. There are some things we need to take note of in this parable. Remember how the king sent messengers to retrieve the people who had been invited, and some of them refused to come, and in fact, some of them killed the messenger? Why did they kill the messenger? This was a way to deny their corrupt nature. Society today isn't satisfied with being non-believers. They want to kill the messenger, too.

They want to drown out our voice, cancel us, make believers who are insecure question their faith. They seem to think that if they could make sure that no one is fit to be invited to the wedding, then they would be okay. It's time for the faithful to have confidence, to ignore the pressures of the world. When Jesus delivered this parable, there were very few believers. They were in a minority, like us today. It took courage to come to the wedding with clean hearts.

But indeed, all of us are invited. Every living human. We have the advantage of having been introduced to the Bible, to the message of Jesus. There are people in the world without this benefit – and I for one do not believe that none of them will get invitations. Perhaps the depth of our faith is related to the directness of our exposure to the teachings of Christ. I don't know what happens to people who are raised Hindu or Buddhist and have only very minimal exposure to Christianity. As a faculty member for decades, I have met many deeply good people who were not of our faith. What I do know is that God does invite everyone. Our duty is live in a way that makes us worthy of that invitation. And we must let God judge others. And I believe that many of the non-Christians that I have met in my life will be at the wedding banquet and will be welcomed guests.

Finally, let's look at a similar parable, as told in the Gospel of Luke:

*“A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. <sup>17</sup> When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ <sup>18</sup> But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ <sup>19</sup> Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ <sup>20</sup> Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’*

*<sup>21</sup> “The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ <sup>22</sup> After the servant had done this, he reported, ‘There is still room for more.’ <sup>23</sup> So his master said, ‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. <sup>24</sup> For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.’ ”*

In this version, the invited guests make excuses about not being able to come – mostly lame excuses, like they need to inspect a field, or they are anxious to try out a pair of oxen. When the servant reported that no one would come, the host ordered his servant to invite the poor, the disabled, those rejected by society. In desperation, he orders random people invited. The point of both of these parables is that when the powerful members of society tell us to reject the invitation, we should be ashamed if we listen to them. We must not spurn the invitation of God.

Today, the biggest threat we face is the sharply diminished respect that society has for those who believe in God, especially for Christians. Some of us get a warning that we are going to die. Some of us do not. We must live every day, gripping that invitation tightly in our hands, determined to accept, and knowing that although we might be living very modest lives, we will prove worthy of that

invitation. We must encourage the messengers out there, telling people they are invited. We can tell our children that yes, we will miss much of their lives. But we will embrace them again at that wedding banquet.