

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm

Part 4: Parable of the Wedding Feast

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We've tackled three of Jesus' parables thus far in our series that are particularly challenging to interpret or embrace. Today's topic, the Parable of the Wedding Feast, is no exception. It portrays a king who reacts violently when his servants are mistreated, forcing people to attend a wedding they weren't initially invited to—indiscriminately gathering both the good and the bad—and casting out a guest for lacking proper attire. What lesson could Jesus possibly be imparting about God, or our relationship with God?

As we've discovered, understanding the ancient context of the parable is crucial. It sheds light on the seemingly enigmatic and helps us find our place within the story, which appears to be Jesus' aim for us.

The parable is set during a tense time; Jesus has just made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and is openly confronting the religious authorities. Jesus is unguarded and confrontational, perhaps understandably so, knowing that some of his listeners would soon participate in his persecution and execution.

Another important aspect of the context is the role of marriage in political alliances during Jesus' time. Royal marriages were not matters of personal choice but strategic moves to forge and strengthen alliances between kingdoms. This provides insight into the king's fury at the invited guests' absence, indicating a refusal to endorse the political union – even rebellion against it, given their treatment of the servants.

The parable's rebellious guests likely represent the religious and political leaders who have resisted change and the inbreaking of God's Realm for centuries and are presently conspiring against Jesus. By this point in his ministry, these leaders had already made up their minds about Jesus. They're not accepting his invitations to join his movement. Jesus isn't seeking to win them over this late in the game. He's exposing their intentions to the crowds.

Then who are the guests that the king eventually gathers? The reference to pulling them off the street, the good and bad alike, probably indicates they are Jesus' diverse follower, which include not only whomever the religious elite scorn, but even those his own followers struggle to accept – tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like.

This parable serves as a stark illustration of the clash between Jesus' generous, inclusive message and the exclusionary practices of the religious authorities and others of his time. But before we start condemning those who oppose Jesus's inclusivity, we had best consider who we ourselves may be in this parable, for no parable truly speaks to us until we locate ourselves within it.

There are five choices.

First, there's the king – but I doubt you're seeing yourself in the king's role. The king is a metaphor for God.

Second, there's the king's son. But this seems to be Jesus himself.

Third, there are the properly attired guests who were dragged in from the streets. Might we be one of these? Perhaps. But let's consider the other two possibilities first.

Fourth, maybe we're the person who isn't wearing the wedding garment. Let's hope not, as he is set out in the outer darkness where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then again, Jesus does seem to have drawn the focus of his parable to just this person. So, Jesus must at least be provoking us to ask the question, "Is this me?"

The identity of this person comes clearer if we consider the fifth and final possible character we could be. "The fifth?" you ask. "Who else has Jesus mentioned besides the king, the bridegroom, the properly attired guests, and the one not wearing a robe?"

Actually, there's one very obvious person who would have been attending the wedding feast whom Jesus has not specifically mentioned. Can you guess who it is? *The bride!*

I don't know what Jesus's Jerusalem audience would have thought about Jesus's seeming omission of the bride here, but I have a good guess about what the early church would have thought. Who is Christ's bride, according to first-century Christians? Let me provide you a few hints, based on early writings.

Ephesians 5:25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, just as *Christ loved the church* and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to *present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind* – yes, so that she may be wholly without blemish."

In other words, the apostle Paul is offering marital advice based on the model of Christ's marriage to his own bride – *the church*. There's even mention of the bride being presented in splendor in a spiritual wedding garment "without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind."

If we skip ahead to the final book of the Bible, we find that Christ's bride may be larger than even Christ's church. Let's take a look.

Revelation 19:7-10: "'Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [Christ] has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure' – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.*' And he said to me, 'These true words are of God.'"

Who is the Lamb's bride in his passage? John's vision depicts not a single bride, but 144,000 of them, all dressed in white wedding robes. (Rev. 7:1-4) Talk about a polyamorous relationship!

The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the number 144,000 indicates the *total* number of those who will join Christ's household and be admitted into heaven. That's not a very large number, considering how many human beings have ever lived on this earth. Yet here is another case where understanding context matters.

In ancient Jewish mystical symbolism, 12 represents *completeness*. There are 12 months in a full year. There are 12 tribes of Israel. And, of course, Jesus chose 12 disciples. What is 144,000? It is $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. In other words, it is "completeness" taken to its highest magnitude. Surely, this number indicates that anyone who chooses to be part of God's Realm and live under God's authority becomes a member of the heavenly household as Christ's own bride.

If this metaphor of completeness were not clear enough, just a few verses later, John of Patmos tells us more about this white-robed crowd: "I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." (Rev. 7:9)

Back to our parable, if the church – or perhaps far more than the church – is Christ's bride, then those brought in from the streets who are attired in wedding robes aren't just party guests. They're dressed to get married. They are the bride!

This may seem a little strange until we remember that weddings involving a king's children were not just the result of love, an act of alliance. A new covenantal relationship is being initiated between two realms. In Judaism, the original covenant was between God and the Children of Abraham, establishing a special relationship between God and the Israelites that was meant to bless not only Abraham and his descendants, but through his descendants, all the nations of the world would be blessed. This parable of the wedding feast reflects Jesus's understanding that the time to bless all the nations of the world had arrived. God was making a new covenant, long-ago predicted by the prophet Jeremiah, in which God was entering a special relationship with the world.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast is about this new covenant, sealed in a marriage alliance involving the king's son and anyone at all who was willing to show up and get married, no matter who they are – even those coming in off the streets who had not originally been invited, the good and the bad alike.

So now, if God is the ruler, Jesus is the bridegroom, and everyone present who has donned a wedding garment is the bride, then who is this poor soul who is not wearing a wedding garment?

He seems to be someone who has been offered a wedding robe and refused it. He doesn't want any part of this marriage.

We have to remind ourselves that Jesus's parables are metaphorical, not literal. This man who has refused a wedding robe is not someone who is actually refusing marriage to another man. It's someone who objects to the new relationship that is being forged between God and humanity – which includes all kinds of people who were not part of the original marriage alliance – the Old Covenant.

Who in their right mind would refuse an offer like this? Well, certainly a lot of religious leaders whose faith built upon a foundation of an exclusive relationship between God and Abraham's Children might object.

Yet there are lots people who, even today, who are not Jewish, who might very well object to this radical expansion of God's family. I must confess that sometimes I am one of these people! There are two reasons why would hesitate to don a wedding robe.

The first reason, to cite Groucho Marx, is that "I don't want to join any club who would accept me as a member." If the bar to being in close relationship with God has dropped so low that even I can get in and be part of God's family, then imagine who else might get in!

It's not just that some of these folks might be "bad" people. They may just be the kind of people I don't care for. They're caustic. They make bad decisions. They don't show me enough respect. I don't like their politics. Our values are different. In short, they piss me off.

Yet, being in deep, committed relationship with Christ, with those we know and love, *and with certain people who piss us off* seems to be exactly what Jesus wants for church that is called by his name. Everyone is invited. Everyone is loved by the bridegroom. Therefore, everyone has a place.

Seen from this perspective, it seems odd that there's only one person in the crowd not wearing a wedding robe! Today, a lot of people – even people who say they are "into" Jesus – turn down this robe. Many call themselves, "Spiritual, but not religious." In other words, they value spirituality, but they don't want anything to do with organized forms of religion.

Admittedly, being "spiritual, but not religious" does have its advantages. I love Christ, not an organization. If I were to identify as "spiritual, but not religious," on Sunday mornings I could nice long walks on the beach, or hike through Oswegatchie Hills, rather than attending church. Frankly, I find it far easier to find God in nature than I can at church. Isn't this true for you?

It's true for most any of us! Yet, as my friend, Lillian Daniel is fond of saying, "Any idiot can find God on a mountaintop – the real challenge is finding God in the company of others as annoying as me."

Nature is where we all can connect with God most easily. But the relationship doesn't go deep until we grow spiritual muscles, learning to find God in those areas we don't expect; that make us uncomfortable.

It's always amazing to me when Christians get bent out of shape when they have to deal with annoying people in the congregation. They seem to think that Jesus has better taste in people, or holds to higher standards. So, if some people don't act very Christian in a Christian church at times, the assumption is that the church is a "bad church," It isn't living up to Christ's expectations.

Yet, what can we expect from a God who would drag any old person from in off the street – the good and the bad – and invite them to marry God's Son?

As the parable suggests, trying to develop a rich and vibrant spiritual life while maintaining close relationships only with those who don't challenge or annoy you works a lot better in theory than in practice. In practice, avoiding those who make us uncomfortable at all costs has quite a high cost. It sets us in the outer darkness where we only ever seem to feel sad and lonely.

Besides the temptation to avoid annoying people, I can think of one other reason why I might hesitate to don a wedding garment. An even deeper reason.

The deeper reason is that, if I'm married to Jesus, I'm married to someone who is infinitely wiser than I am; whose awareness is far vaster than my own; and who always seems to "push me into places I would not necessarily go myself." In other words, if I marry this Jesus guy, I relinquish a certain portion of my self-control and autonomy. It means that when I make decisions, I am no longer acting alone, so I will always need to include Jesus in my decision-making process.

And look where this got me. Fifteen months ago, when I stated in my ministerial profile that I was only considering serving churches on the West Coast, I made the "mistake" of checking in with Jesus and he said, "Actually, Niantic, Connecticut, is where I want you right now." Of course, this worked out pretty darned well. But boy, was it ever stressful to let go of my autonomy and trust.

Even when it came down to looking for my next church, Jesus weighed in again. There was another church I was in conversation with regarding my next Call besides the Florida church. It was a church just twenty minutes from my home in Portland, Oregon! While church in Florida is struggling mightily right now, with significant conflict in the congregation, the Oregon church told me that the congregation is quite strong, happy, and healthy, with no real problems. My first thought was, "Sweet Jesus, this is awesome!" But then I checked in with Jesus. My very best discernment told me that Jesus preferred that I go help a struggling community in Florida right now rather than the one with few issues just down the street.

So, I dropped out of the Portland church's search process the day after my first interview and accepted the Call to Florida.

If I weren't wearing that darned wedding garment, I might have been moving back to Portland on Monday, not St. Petersburg. But then again, my wedding garment actually defines where

“home” is. “Home” is where the bridegroom is, even if it means that I must continue to live apart from my human bride (who is also married to Jesus) for a just little while longer.

While I have been here in Niantic, I have certainly found *this* congregation to be “home.” This home that you and Christ provided me has far surpassed my greatest expectations. This is one reason why I keep wearing the wedding robe and including Christ in my decision-making process – even if it means being pushed once again “into places I would not necessarily go myself.”

The intention of Jesus’s strange parable about the Wedding Feast is to put you and me in the position of one who has been invited to the wedding feast *as Christ’s bride*, and now has to decide whether or not to accept the invitation and join a very large family.

It doesn’t matter how many times you have turned down the invitation in the past. It is still here for you. Conversely, it doesn’t matter how many times you have accepted Christ’s invitation in the past. As we know from human relationships, a marriage that lasts is a choice we make each and every day.