

Matthew 22:1-14

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

‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then 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.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’

Today we are going to take a trip to a prison where Pastor Chris is leading a bible study with several inmates. Richard was a leader among the inmates and was instrumental in getting many of them to attend.

Lorenzo, a prisoner, had just finished reading most of the Gospel I just read. Then Richard spoke up:

“So you mean that Jesus is throwing this gangster party, but he’s rejected by the people with money, who I guess have better things to do. But he doesn’t wanna have a party and nobody come so he invites street people. “Check this out”, Richard said to the other prisoners. “We’re gonna go to this party. It’s a classy

party, but people like us can come. See, people like me, we know where all the bad people are at! So we gotta be the ones to go and invite them, right? I'm your messenger, right here!"

He had both a smile and intensity. It was as though Richard was suddenly sensing an alignment between him and his fellow inmates and the Gospel story.

He goes on: "People like us are bad. Thieves, drug addicts, crack heads, gangsters, lawbreakers, bad people. There are a lot of us out there. I mean if the king really wants his house to be full, what the heck, I'll help him find them. I mean it makes sense, doesn't it? If we're here at the party, having a good time with the king, there'd be less of us jackin' car stereos and being on the streets, right? It'd be like you can call people like us everyone—good and bad, don't make no difference. The old white guys, thieves, the tattooed gang members, the Natives, even the murderers." Pastor Chris thought to himself: "Richard is leading one of the best Bible studies I've ever seen in this jail".

"And just like it says here," Richard concluded, "the wedding hall was filled with guests!"

Richard finally sat down next to the pastor with a loud, exhausted sigh and a smile and could now enjoy the party. "What would it be like", the pastor thought, "to work with Richard out on the streets recruiting for such a kingdom?"

Just then the narrow vertical window in the multipurpose jailhouse room door squeaked open and an unhappy set of eyes scanned the gathering. The Correction Officers would be coming to take everyone back to their cells in just a minute.

"I thought our reading of the wedding banquet parable could end right there", Chris thought, where Richard had brought us: with the hall happily filled with guests. We didn't have time to take on the rather difficult verses that followed.

It was too late: Lorenzo plodded along reading verse 11 while the pastor was distracted with the guard's signals at the door. They would often get cold stares from the officers when they'd loudly pop the doors open and had to wait for the bible study to end. They would say: "Do your prayer and wrap things up". It is an

uncomfortable experience to pray aloud when a waiting correctional officer is staring at you only feet away.

Pastor Chris said, “No, it’s OK, Lorenzo, you can stop there, We’ll read the rest next week.”

That’s when Richard cut him off.

“Naw, hold up, Chris! We’re not done. Keep reading . . .” He didn’t like the worry he saw in the eyes of Lorenzo, who had already begun to read ahead. Richard smelled foul play and thought the Pastor was covering something up. His elation at the story was now already turning to pain, like he’d been lied to.

“Keep reading,” he ordered Lorenzo, and he crossed his arms while leaning forward to listen to the rest of the story.

Lorenzo continue: “But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And . . . and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him . . . into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” Lorenzo looked up at Chris after finishing.

“Just what I thought!” Richard said. “What do you expect from people like us? We don’t have all the right clothes. We never look right! You should know that!”

Though these were Jesus’ words, and ancient, he nevertheless held Chris responsible and said: “Why do you even invite us to any of this if you’re just gonna humiliate us and throw us out anyway? It’d be better not to come than have you kick us out!”

The guards were going to open the doors any second. This is what Chris was trying to avoid. He hoped they could talk about the rest of the parable the following week.

Richard pointed at Chris and said: “You get our hopes up! And it’s beautiful what you tell us—that God is different, that he wants everyone. Even the bad people like me. And I’m excited and wanting to tell everyone—”

“OK, hang on,” Chris said. “I had hoped this would be one of the weeks when the guards would have to handle a medical emergency and so would leave us in here a while longer.” He explained quickly that in first-century Palestine, some scholars say it was the custom for the host of the wedding feast—and especially a king—to provide these overgarments for the guests, right at the door, before they got into the banqueting hall. “Like those little birthday hats parents give to each kid who comes to the party’, he said.”

Richard then countered with the kind of insight no seminary could teach. He said:

“Even if they are given little birthday hats like you say, if you’re gonna invite people like us from the streets to your party or church or house or heaven or whatever, you should know we might not wanna wear a stupid hat. We’re not gonna play by all your little games and rules. So you didn’t really want us at all! Or did you? But just so you can throw us back out into the darkness? That hurts so deep, Chris. Better to stay in the streets with the bad people than be told you’re wanted and then find out you’re really not!”

Then the doors clanged open with the same violent noise as ever. As Richard left he turned around and said, “Next week you better explain why we have to wear those stupid party hats.

So....., what would you say to Richard about having to wear the party hats, or as the parable says, the wedding garment?

Real change comes from the inside out. First people get connected to Jesus and via the Holy Spirit inside, they begin to change and as the scriptures say: Take on the mind of Christ. So for the inmates, hopefully this is the first step toward a relationship with Christ that in time will prompt them to change.

Clothing is a common New Testament metaphor for spiritual change. Paul wrote in Romans, "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Rom 13:14).

And in First Corinthians he wrote: "The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:53).

In Colossians it says: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12).

Finally, in First Peter we are admonished, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5).

Being clothed anew is a consistent New Testament expression for holiness and righteousness. The old clothes have to come off and new ones put on.

This text confronts us with the paradox of God's free invitation to the banquet with no strings attached and God's requirement of "putting on" something appropriate to that calling. The theological point is that we are warned of the dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing except showing up.