

THE CHURCH OF THE WEDDINGS

Some of the most vivid memories of my early days as your pastor are of the endless comments I heard about weddings. There were many from members of this church, of course, but I refer to the many comments from people *wherever I went* about who had been married in this church. They had been, their son or daughter had been, their niece or nephew had been, or their good friend or next-door neighbor had been married in this church. “Oh, you’re the pastor of that cute little church with the white steeple. You know, I was married there.” Of course, they have not been here since. So it became quickly obvious to me what our reputation was in this community. We were The Church of the Weddings. We were a wedding chapel for people wanting to get married in a lovely setting – a cute sanctuary with a white steeple.

I still hear these remarks, of course. In casual conversation, humans look first for connections. And the connection with this church for many people is weddings. No harm intended. No offense taken. But why would so many people assume that I, as the pastor of a Christian church, would be enthralled and delighted to learn that somebody I did not know and would likely never see here again had been married in this church? Is that what the Christian church is for and about?

Well, actually, I like it when people get married – assuming they mean love and faithfulness and life-long commitment. I like it even better if they intend a Godly home committed to Christ Jesus. I know that our wedding staff works – sometimes against considerable odds – to make that the atmosphere and setting and intention here. I also know we have some wonderful church members who were married here, and even a few who started coming here *because* they were married here.

But the fact is, about ninety-eight percent of those who come here to get married think of us as a wedding chapel – a place to get married – not as a Christian church: a congregation they might want to be part of; a place to come to as Christians wanting to participate in the Christian Life and, in fellowship with others, wanting to try to increase or enhance the influence of Christ’s Kingdom on earth. And if we were to look at the records, we would discover that less than one percent of those who come here to get married ever come here

for any other reason. In short, I am not altogether enthralled with our reputation as The Church of the Weddings. And since most of us know all this on one level or another, the fact is that we are in it for the money.

Now, money can be a good thing, if faithfully used. So this is no great grievance or complaint. I merely wish that people in this area knew that this church was more than just a place for weddings. I hope all of you think that our mission and our purpose here are more than just providing a place for non-members to get married.

Still, weddings can be incredibly important, and there is more than one kind of marriage. If we were known as The Church of the Weddings by the light of the parable we just read, then I would be ecstatic. Do you feel that way too? On the other hand, that may not be true for you. This is one of Jesus' most incredible and most "hidden" parables. But we do not all have the same experience with the same parables. Other parables may have eluded you longer, and this one may have been clear to you a lot faster than it has been for me. Personally, the Parable of the Unjust Steward and this Parable of the Wedding Garment have been my nemeses. They each have plagued me for years. Every time some study group or a new commentary would come up with a new piece of the puzzle, I would be as delighted as some of my friends were to find a great antique at a garage sale.

Of course, we do not have to come up with the same meanings for the parables. Not only do people have different explanations, but the parables can shift according to our needs and situations. I do not believe there is only one possible interpretation of the meaning of the wedding garment. But I will probably end up sounding like it, so be alert. However, those who take the parables seriously can usually tell when the meaning clicks in for them and speaks to their souls. So we do not have to agree, but we do each need to be searching for that click that brings it into focus. The only thing that makes no sense whatsoever is people claiming that they believe Jesus is the Messiah and then not caring what He is trying to teach us.

I.) Let's start with the easy part. It only took me about ten years to get this. By the way, it started to trouble me a lot, at one point, that Jesus was hiding principles in parables and I was always trying to unlock their secrets for people who did not seem to care enough to go looking for the meaning themselves. I wondered if maybe I would be in big trouble on the other side for being too eager to help. Why was

I trying to reveal what Jesus was so carefully hiding in parables? But eventually Jesus reassured me. He said: “Don’t worry. First of all, you are not as brilliant as you think. And secondly, people who are not ready for the truth cannot remember it for very long. It’s okay to keep doing the best you can.” So that is what I am doing still today.

The parable ends: *“Many are called, but few are chosen.”* Or depending on the translation: *“Many are invited, but few are chosen.”* Even though this is the punchline, it clarifies the context more than the parable itself. It is still very helpful to remember what is going on. Jesus is in a verbal firefight with the chief priests and elders of the nation. These are not the happy days around the shores of Galilee. This is Jerusalem on the Monday after Palm Sunday. Jesus has three days left to teach and to heal, and at the end of the third day He will be arrested. Then the following day will be Good Friday. He has come to the temple to teach. The crowds are huge because it is Passover season. The chief priests and elders are frightened by His popularity and influence, so they challenge His authority. By what right does He come into the temple square to teach? Who does He think He is? What are His credentials? Especially when His teachings are so different from theirs. And it would be fair to remember: they do not have two thousand years of subsequent history for perspective like we do – if we want it.

Jesus derails their challenge by asking them about the authority of John the Baptist. Then He tells two parables, both of them scathing to His challengers. Clearly, then, the wedding guests who would not come to the wedding feast are these very same religious leaders who are so confident in their positions and in their righteousness. The parable is also stating, however subtly, that Jesus is the King’s Son – God’s Messiah – and since these prominent Jewish leaders will not come to His wedding feast, God will kill them off and bring others to the wedding banquet.

To seal it, Jesus ends with a blazing insult that challenges the core claim to Jewish authority and identity: their the claim that “We are The Chosen People. God called us through Abraham and Moses, set us apart, and made special covenant with us on Mount Sinai. We are The Chosen!”

“Let me tell you something,” says Jesus. “Many are called, but only those who respond are The Chosen. And you have not, do not, and will not respond. Since you will not come, God is quitting on you

and calling (inviting) others. And if they do not respond, they will not be chosen either.” The parable will go on to make that point very explicit.

In any case, it is hard to “hear” this parable if we do not comprehend the context. And it is hard to comprehend the context because at first we do not want to realize how incredibly angry Jesus was. The chief priests and elders could hardly believe that anybody would dress them down so scathingly, and right out in public. They were used to deference, or maybe at worst a quiet grumbling. But Jesus not only gave back better than He got, He did it with power and great skill, and in a way that stripped away every claim they made to authority and confidence. They had challenged His authority, and now their own authority lay in rubble. Of course, they did not admit to any of this, but you can tell by their reaction that it had cut too deep: *“Then the Pharisees went away and agreed on a plan to trap him in argument.”* They would spend the next three days trying to discredit Jesus before the crowds. Failing that, they would “take Him out” any way they could. That was the reaction of these normally righteous, well-meaning, God-fearing men. They were enraged enough to kill, and not by normal means or legal processes. We would be right to say that they were enraged enough to murder Jesus in cold blood. And they not only wanted to – they did it! If we do not see and understand this, how can we hope to comprehend the parable?

II.) Nevertheless, within this context, the parable has a life of its own. The King, alias God, is determined to honor his son’s wedding and to make it a huge and wonderful celebration. Naturally such a celebration takes great preparation. But in Jesus’ time, there was no refrigeration or fast food, and most transportation was by walking. As a result, the invitation to a great feast was two-fold. The first invitation was sent out by messenger. If you accepted this invitation, it meant you agreed to hold yourself in readiness. You would be ready to drop everything and come when the second announcement arrived that all was in readiness. So once the acceptance list was in, the host (in this case, the King) could proceed to full preparations: slaughtering the necessary number of animals, cooking, setting tables, etc. And with this underway, the King would send out the confirmation invitation so that everybody could get dressed up and come while things were fresh and ready.

In this parable, the first invitation represents centuries of God calling his Chosen People – making covenant with them – asking them

to prepare, be faithful, keep ready. The King's invitation starts with Abraham, and the Chosen People are being invited, down through Jewish history, to get ready for the Messiah – the great wedding banquet. They are to hold themselves in readiness so that when the confirmation invitation arrives, they will be able to drop everything and come to the coronation party of their True Leader – here represented by the great wedding. But when the great day arrives, they are busy. They are even annoyed at the King's attempt to interrupt them with this wedding business. You understand that this will mean great waste: the oxen and fattened calves have been slaughtered and prepared; all is in readiness. But the invited guests – who had all agreed to come – will not come. The dinner is getting cold. Either the King has to find some instant substitute guests or he will have to throw everything out and start over.

But why didn't the invited guests – The Chosen who had agreed to come – come? We all know the reasons, because we all have the same excuses. They got busy with their own affairs. They got to thinking there was no real banquet – that it was just an ancient myth. They were afraid of where it might lead. They did not know the King's Son very well and were not sure they wanted Him running their lives. They did not trust the King's messengers. They were afraid it might lead to their having to swear some kind of allegiance to the King's Son. Weddings make people nervous because they are always about commitment. I have not been to a wedding since last night. Why were so many people weeping? Was it because of the flowers and pretty dresses? What was moving them so deeply? It was the commitment – and all the hopes and fears and possibilities and pitfalls that go with it.

Strange, isn't it, that we call the bondage of isolation and self-centeredness “freedom,” yet we think of life expanded, creative, and full of promise for us and the whole community as “bondage.” Just so with Life in Christ Jesus. The surrender to abundance, meaning, purpose, joy, and true identity seems very scary – so filled with obligation and discipline. But really, it is the pressure we feel about having to “keep up” with someone who loves us so much. So we put it off, and that magnifies our fears. We would like to inch our way in. But how do you get “a little bit” married? Which bits of you are and which bits are not? That is one of the meanings of this parable: No spectators can know or comprehend the Christian Way. It is not open to half-hearted approaches.

Anyway, the invited guests do not come, so the King settles their hashes and gives instructions to his servants to go invite anybody from anywhere. In short, the Gentiles are going to get a shot at the wedding banquet. People with no proper bloodlines, no Jewish history or tradition, no proper manners or breeding or customs. Anybody and everybody willing in any way to show up is now invited. Even people like us.

III.) So we come at last to the wedding garment. Some poor slob gets dragged in off the streets. He has no idea why or what's going on. He has no time to go home and change, and probably has no suitable clothes at home even if he had been given time to get them. But the King comes in, spots his inappropriate attire, and is revolted that someone is there who is unwilling to honor his son's wedding. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" The man is speechless, totally taken aback, completely surprised. He is not having a good day. Earlier, from out of nowhere, the King's servants had swept him up and dragged him away from whatever he had been doing. Now he is in these gorgeous surroundings, and there is food like he has never even imagined before. And before he can figure out what's going on, the King's attendants bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness. Easy come, easy go.

What is the wedding garment? The King is God. The Son is Jesus. The invited guests are the Jews. Clearly the parable, like all parables, intends for us to identify things with meanings beyond what they seem at first. What is the wedding garment? Surely it must be something the man might have had *despite* the circumstances, but he does not have it. It must be some kind of spiritual clothing. A Jew outside the proscribed establishment, or even a Gentile, could have had it. Are not all humans lonely for their Creator? Underneath the posturing and the shields, do we not all long to know God? What is the wedding garment?

Over the years, study groups and commentaries have come up with plausible answers. The wedding garment is faith, or it is love. But I always want to know: Faith in what? What kind of love? They are good answers – sound and meaningful – but I could never feel the "click." Too vague. Too pat. That would never have gotten Jesus murdered.

The wedding garment must be some kind of genuine desire to know the King and his Son. Even Gentiles like us can carry that within our hearts and souls: a true spiritual loneliness and hunger – a deep desire to know and be known by God. I like that better.

Those who know about the early church know that at baptism, a person came up out of the water to receive a brand new white garment, as symbol of the New Life they were putting on. A few commentators associate the white garment of baptism – a New Life – with the wedding garment of this parable. You have to be willing to receive a brand New Life or you cannot stay at the wedding banquet. I like that a lot. That fits really well. That is the best of the explanations I have heard – almost a click. But still not good enough. Too tame for the One we call Savior and Lord.

You do not have to come with me on this next step, of course, but I so hope you will. First let me ask you: Who is the King's Son going to marry? The church is the bride of Christ. (John 3:29; II Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17)

What is a wedding garment? Is it merely the best piece of cloth you have at home to wrap around you? Would the King object if your best clothes were beggar's rags? I claim that a wedding garment is not just nice togs. **A wedding garment is what you get married in.** Now I feel the "click," and the chill goes up my spine. There are no spectators in God's Kingdom! The parable begins: "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ...*" We come to this wedding banquet to get married to the Son of God – not to stand around watching. We ourselves are invited to enter a love-bond, deep and profound. There is no other relationship possible – within the limits of our symbolic language – if we are to follow Jesus into His New Life. Get past male or female; get past the earthly Jesus to the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Christ. We come for union with Christ Jesus. We are not going back to law codes or moralisms or frantic pleadings for us to be "good." The invitation is to a love-bond of profound depth and power. In John's language: "*In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*" (John 14:20) Sounds like marriage language to me.

We are not any good with the rules and principles of the Christian Life until after we have the relationship. That is why God sent the Son. It all keeps backfiring and dead-ending if we try to approach the Christian WAY without the power of this relationship supporting and inspiring everything we do. But most profoundly, this

is not about standing around watching somebody else get married. This guy is thrown into the outer darkness because he is not willing to get hitched. He wants to watch. He wants to stay uninvolved. And if you reject such love, where do you end up? Alone in the darkness, with all your true identity and gifts and destiny bound up. Some of you maybe do not know that yet. But some of us really do.

Anyway, the wedding garment is your *willingness to BE the church*, the faithful people – the bride of Christ – both individually and together. And when that finally sinks in, I hear the CLICK.

The reason it took me so long to get this parable is because my mind does not want to go there. I have trouble believing it. It did not cross my mind for years that it might be about me – that I myself was being invited to get married. I never worried much about the outer darkness because that is where I came from. Zero from zero is zero. Haul me out, show me somebody else's wedding, and throw me back – what difference does it make? But if it is *my* wedding and *your* wedding and *we* are going to get married to Christ, then that is altogether incredible. And I am so sorry that the church started getting side-tracked by fear and Hell and Second Comings that never come – until we forgot all about the real Gospel: The wedding. *Our* wedding.

So I still hope this church will have the reputation of being The Church of the Weddings. Only, I keep hoping that will shift to a different level of weddings: a church where people walk into true Life with Christ. Wouldn't that be something, if that became our reputation? And people would not just talk about friends or relatives who got married here. They would say, "That's where I got married to Jesus. That's where my friend found out what the Christian Life was really about. That's where my son or daughter fell in love with the Holy Spirit. That's where people go who really want to have a love-bond with God."

COMMUNION SERVICE

IV.) So now the Good News: You really are invited to the wedding banquet. The parable is not kidding. From any and every walk of life, we are invited. There are no barriers for getting in here – no barriers to keep us out of the wedding. That is the staggering News of the Gospel. The Christ is eager and willing to marry any of us who will have Him. The barriers are entirely on the other side – our side.

THE CHURCH OF THE WEDDINGS

But the King does finally come to ask: Are you willing and ready for the marriage? Are you ready to say “I do”? It is not just a desire to be difficult. It is a WAY, a PATH, a NEW LIFE that cannot be experienced without the trust and the risk of the love-bond. Apart from Christ, we cannot go into this New Life. It takes two to tango. How far do we think we will get in the Kingdom of God all by ourselves?

Come to the wedding feast. Only, do not come as a spectator. Come to get married.

You want a real soul mate? Jesus is waiting for you.