

“Are You Missing the Party?”

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Matthew 22:1-14

This is the audience participation part of the service, so pay attention. Are there any current or former Miss Americas present? Raise your hand. I see no hands. To make things fair, are there any current or former Mr. Universes present? Remember Arnold Schwarzenegger when he was shooting the steroids? He was a Mr. Universe. No hands. Let me ask you one more question, and I'm not sure about this. Are there any current or former “farm families of the year” present? Raise your hand. No hands. Hold that thought. I'm going to get back to it.

If it seems like a strange question, why not with this parable? Is this about the strangest thing you've heard in your life? When we discussed this parable at Bible Study Wednesday evening we took an informal poll of favorite parables. You can guess the answers: The Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, the Good Samaritan, those were favorites that were mentioned. No one mentioned this parable as their favorite. That's not hard to believe, is it?

You do need to understand this. It's not a parable about dressing up for church. Did you hear the part in there about the wedding robe? A good friend of mine from Woodward, a woman by the name of Sylva Grantham, thought that men should not be in church unless they were wearing a coat and tie, and women needed to wear a dress in church. Hillary Clinton would not be welcome in Sylva Grantham's church. Sylva said, “You need to dress up for church. It's one way to show respect for God.” I understand and appreciate what she was saying. I don't agree with it, but I understand and appreciate what she was saying.

This isn't a story about dressing up for church. That's not what it means. Beverly mentioned some of the story in the Children's Moment. It's easy to see that this might be a story about the last judgment. The king seems to be God, the son is Jesus, the prophets who were killed are the servants, the banquet hall is heaven. But there might be something else involved. Did you notice that when the servants went out a second time the scripture says they invited everyone, both good and bad. Is that our picture of heaven? For most of us, our picture of heaven is that good

people go to heaven. They invited everyone, both good and bad. The banquet hall was filled.

What's going on in this story? How about this strange section about the wedding robe? Can you imagine, if it's a story about heaven, this guy gets in and says, "Whew, I finally made it." Then God comes along and says, "You're not dressed right." Was he wearing some kind of t-shirt that on the front said, "Salvation the Old-Fashioned Way," and on the back it said, "Earn it." Is that why God kicked him out? We don't *earn* salvation, do we?

Salvation is a gift. Life is a gift. Besides Suzanne and our children who are present here today, no one else knows Max and Patty Wolfe. Both of my parents died just about four years ago, God bless them. I wish you could have known them. I was thinking as I prepared for the sermon this past week, if they hadn't met at that Sunday School class party in fellowship hall, I wouldn't be here. Have you ever thought that if it hadn't been for some kind of chance meeting of your parents . . .

Life is a gift, but I'm not just speaking of life as a gift. I'm speaking of life in Christ as a gift. When we complain about life, it is as if we are spitting in the face of God. Life is a gift. Life in Christ, the life we have as part of the church, is a sacred gift. We know not only God's presence in our lives and the leading of God's spirit in our lives, we experience the fellowship of a church family. This past week I visited some of your fellow members in the hospital and they told me you were praying for them. They received cards from some of you. We received a card here at the church, I have it here. It's from First Christian Church in Skiatook. It says, "We are praying for your congregation this week." That is something we do in this area. Churches take turns praying for each other. Several people signed this card.

One person said, "I pray that our Lord continues to bless the good folks at First Church and all the good works you do in his name. Shalom."—Opal Rives. I wouldn't know Opal Rives if she walked in the sanctuary today, but she is praying for us. She is praying for our church. That is a part of life in Christ.

This couple said, "God is faithful to keep his promises."—Mike and Mary Ann.

"May your good works bring growth and prosperity for you and your church family."—Marilyn Bradshaw

"Our prayer for you and your people is the Lord's continued bless-

ings on your ministry.”—Anna and Ray Lierly

Life in Christ is a gift. I believe that for us as Christians the most accurate measure of our life in Christ is not our faith, our good works, or how much we pray, but the joy that is evident in our lives.

I didn't notice until this week when I selected the hymns this line from that beloved hymn, "In the Garden," "The joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known." Do you have that joy of Christ in your life? Jesus said, "I came not that I teach you or that I could heal or that I could tell you how bad things are or how bad you are. I came so that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full."

I believe one way that we can know this joy is to do what I call singing the Lord's song. Bear with me while I share this story. If you hear about another E.Coli outbreak, it's a false alarm. I can tell you that's not what happened. Suzanne and I were in El Chico a couple of weeks ago. We had eaten there before and had not experienced this, but while we were there one of those singing vaqueros came by. I'm not sure what you would call him, but he was not really the kind of guy I want coming and singing while I'm eating Mexican food. He came by anyway, and thankfully there was a table next to us, a family with some children, and he went to their table and went to another part of the restaurant. Then he came back again.

He was singing that classic Mexican song, "It Had to Be You." As he approached our booth I thought, "What the heck, I'll just start singing with him." He came and got by me and I was singing the melody and he was singing harmony. It wasn't an E.Coli outbreak, people were just sick of our singing.

I'd like to say that Mark Beckwith would have been proud of me, but if Mark had been there and someone would have asked him, he would have said, "I've never seen that guy in my life." It's not singing "It Had to Be You" in a Mexican restaurant, it's singing the Lord's song, a song of joy.

Some people might say, "You talk to me about joy and we've just had the worst week in the history of the Dow. You want me to be joyful?" I promise you this is not a joyful time for Sooner fans. The Sooners not only lost to Texas, OSU won. That makes it even worse for Sooner fans. Some guys might say, "You come with me at my job some day and talk about being joyful." "Try being married to the person I'm married to." "Put up with my kids for a while and talk about being joyful."

This is the Miss America part of the sermon. You women who get unhappy with your husbands from time to time, remember that none of you raised your hands when I asked if you were a former Miss America. You guys who get unhappy with your wives, not a Mr. Universe in the bunch.

Maybe that's not all bad. I've never served a church in which a Miss America was a member, but one time I did serve a church where a member of that church finished 1st runner up in the Miss Oklahoma contest when she was in college. While we were there, her husband divorced her. I conducted a wedding one time for a couple. She was a member of our church and he was a young man she had met who had been a "Mr. Oklahoma Weight Lifter of the Year." They stayed married about six months. Turned out he loved his muscles more than he loved his new wife. While in school, I served a church where there was a family who were once the Grant County Farm Family of the Year. One time that wife and mother came and talked to me and told me her husband spent more time with the cows than he did with her.

When we complain about life, it is as if we are spitting in the face of God. I knew a guy one time who was unhappy with life. He told me he had a dream and he met Jesus in the dream and he started telling Jesus how bad things were. He said, "It was about then that I noticed his scars. I stopped complaining about how bad things were."

The Good News of our gospel today is this, we don't believe that God is a king who destroys cities. We believe that God is a loving father who gave his only son. We believe in a God who invites us to a party and expects us to invite others, also.

Have you ever noticed that there were several times in scripture when Jesus would meet people he would greet them, "Be of good cheer," or "Cheer up," or just the word, "joy." Some translations read this way—it's the longest word in the Bible—18 letters with an apostrophe. "Kwitcherbellyachin'."

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. The Good News is this, the party not only lasts for eternity, it starts right now, today. It's a part of what it is to live life in Christ. Are you missing that party? Amen