

Sermon Notes – October 11, 2020
“*The Invitation*” (with Rev. Sandi Hood)
Matthew 22:1-14

Will you pray with me? Good and Loving God, I pray that the words of my mouth are not so much my words, but your words. And I pray that the meditations of our hearts are focused solely on you. Bless our time together and give us ears to listen. I pray this all in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

Well... there's no getting around to it. I'm what some may call seriously-fashioned challenged – and I always have been. To this day, I can shop faster than any woman I know because I panic the minute I walk into the women's section. More often than not, I turn around as fast as I can and I head for the houseware section. I honestly have no idea what I'm doing and it scares the pants off of me. Then there seems to be all sorts of fashion rules that escape me entirely – like “you can't wear white to weddings” or “you can't wear white shoes before Easter or after Labor Day” – and those are just the fashion rules that I know. It's no wonder when the question, “Sandi, what are you going to wear?” comes up, I'm terror-stricken. For a long time, TLC had a popular show for fashion-offenders. No doubt about it, I am a “What-not-to-wear” Clint and Stacy dream come true.

Today's gospel lesson talks about someone who dressed all the wrong way; but thankfully not in the way that you and I are accustomed to thinking. If by chance the parable rings a bell, but you don't quite remember it ending that way, there's a good reason. Luke tells a similar story but it ends much more agreeable than this one does. ***Today, we must wrestle with one of the hardest sayings of Jesus: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”*** We're left scratching our heads wondering, “But wait a minute.. Where's grace in all of this?” Matthew tends to have us scratching our heads, doesn't he? He's much more direct and often when we're paying attention to his message, we find our toes hurting because he's stepped all over them. In case you haven't noticed, Matthew has a considerable problem with hypocrites – the wolves in life who pose

in sheep's clothing – the folks who squint all the time because they are so busy looking for the splinters in the eyes of others, that they avoid doing the hard work of looking at themselves.

Let me give you a little context for today's story. At this point in scripture, Jesus has already ruffled the feathers of the Pharisees and the chief priests. Just the day before, Jesus was so upset that he turned over the tables of the money-changers just outside the temple. Still, he came back the next day to teach and those religious leaders were ready to pounce. "Jesus, by what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you that authority?" they asked him. Jesus responds to their questions in three parables including our scripture lesson today. He begins, "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a King who gave a wedding banquet for his son." A wedding feast to me conjures up a picture of a grand celebration. All of those invited are welcome to come and have a seat at the banquet table – and it sounds nice enough, doesn't it? But after that, it starts getting a little strange.

The King sent his servants to deliver the invitations. The King makes the first move by inviting his people. The first time the messengers went out, it didn't go over so well. Their responses, "Sorry man, my yard's a mess. I'll catch ya next time!" - "Well, work's got me covered up. I don't get to see my family as it is." - "No. I don't think so. I've got to feed my dog." I mean, who turns down a party with a King?? The second time that the invitations are sent, the King has gone on to make even more elaborate plans. This time, it goes just awful! ... Slammed doors, bloodied noses, profanity, and some were so put out with the interruption that they killed the messengers. What in the world is going on??

The King, highly upset at how his people were treated, sends out an army to punish those who killed his messengers. But, the party is still set. As the story unfolds, ***the King extends his invitation to people everywhere.*** "Come. Come and celebrate with us! Come and have a seat at my table so you can get to know me and my son. Come, so we can laugh and dream together." We read that the banquet hall was filled from top to bottom with all kinds of people – all shapes and sizes – all walks of life.

Truth is, we might raise an eyebrow today to some of the faces around that table, maybe even lock our car doors if they walked by us... but not this King! This was the kind of party that some of them would have never imagined they would receive an invitation to. ***That, my friends, is grace.*** Here comes the sticky part - the part where the “what not to wear” guy is thrown out. *Wait a minute. Wait a minute. We like a happy ending... Luke had a happy ending! What happened? How could the King, who has invited everyone, who has asked them to drop everything and come as they are, banish someone because they were dressed incorrectly? Should a guest who has just come in off the street be expected to have the proper outfit for a wedding that they hadn't even planned on attending in the first place?*

What are we going to make of this over-the-top parable? I loved Dr. Lance Pape's commentary on this passage. ***If we really think about it, it's the story of God in salvation history.*** The King is God. The Son is Jesus. The initial invitees were God's children. The messengers were God's prophets, disciples, and missionaries. The punishment to those who persecuted God's messengers was perhaps the allegory of the burned temple in 70 A.D. And according to scholars, it was customary that the wedding garments were furnished by the host. So, customarily this King would have supplied garments for ALL of his guests - lavished, beautiful garments. But, the man in this story wasn't dressed properly. It wasn't a statement on the where he shopped - ***it indicates that he refused to be wrapped in the clothing that was offered by the King.*** He may have been there physically, but his heart just wasn't in it. He wanted nothing to do with being happy and celebrating. This man had a choice and he chose to not accept what was being given to him, even though it was free.

This parable was shared over 2,000 years ago, but I think that it still speaks to us today. A few tidbits here: Number 1, what we are wearing should fit the occasion. Throughout the New Testament we find references to the way that God clothes us as a result of the spiritual changes we undergo. I think the real question is ... ***Does the way our heart is clothed match the fantastic invitation that God has given us in this life?*** Are we willing to clothe ourselves as Colossians 3:12 says,

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience.” I have to be honest. I think some days, I am still reaching into my closet and pulling out some of the same old clothes that I’ve always worn... how about you?

We can also lose sight of what’s important. Who in here is not busy? Anybody? Our lives are busy and sometimes, in the craziness of life, it can be easy to lose perspective and we put off those things that really, really matter and we lose our sense of priorities. Some of the people in this parable were so busy with the everyday demands of life that they failed to stop and experience the amazing joy and celebration of the life that God had to offer. We also can’t earn a place at God’s table. And we don’t need to because we’ve already been invited.

That feast was full of good people. Good and bad. None of them did anything to earn a place at the table. None of them did anything to earn that invitation. God only asked one person to leave and that was because he didn’t want to be there.

Accepting the invitation is far more than just showing up. Remember when I said that Matthew had a big problem with hypocrites? Jesus shared this, who was Jesus talking to? ... Pharisees and the chief priests. Jesus was talking to the religious folks who saw themselves as “one of the in crowd” because they knew the laws and they obeyed the laws. For Jesus, the law was about more than just following the rules. The greatest law Jesus said was “to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Earlier this year, my husband had been given tickets to one of the greatest singers of our generation – and that was Andre Bocelli. A life-time concert that he always dreamed of going to! It was in Charlotte and initially the concert had been cancelled – and then it was rescheduled. He was so excited! I had scheduled a trip out of town and the return date was the date of the concert. We knew that I was going to be cutting it close. It was in February. The weather was really nasty in Boston. Our

flight had been delayed and delayed and delayed. By the time that the plane had landed in Charlotte, the concert was already an hour and fifteen minutes underway. I was not dressed for a fancy concert - I was in comfortable flying clothes. My husband had on a normal shirt and khaki pants. We rushed to the Coliseum. I have to tell you, the seats were not great that we had. We were just grateful to get them in the first place. They really were nose-bleed seats. We walked into the Coliseum and you could've heard a pin drop. As we were trying to rush around and find our seats, out-of-nowhere a man came up beside me and tapped me on the shoulder. He said, "Excuse me. Excuse me. Have you been seated yet?" I said, "No. We're still trying to find our seats." He asked for our tickets, looked at them, and paused. He said, "I'll tell you what... I've got some better tickets. I'll trade you." We didn't know anything about the seating there. We took his word for it and traded tickets. The ushers helped us find our seats. They kept telling us to "go down there and go down there... etc." Before we knew it, we were on the floor. Then we were told to go down there. An usher took us to the second row, center aisle, right dead-center in front of Andre Bocelli as he was singing. It was the most wonderful thing that you could ever imagine. We were filled with so much joy, humbled and honored to be there... so blown away by this guys' gift that we did not deserve.

We got there right before intermission. When the lights came on, there were people dressed in tuxedos and ball-gowns all around us. And here we were dressed in what we had. It didn't matter. It didn't matter because that could not rob us of the joy of being there, celebrating. They were hugging us and we were hugging them. It was an evening that I will never forget.

... So, you all have been given an invitation too. An incredible invitation to participate in an incredible life - a life to live abundantly. I will leave you with this question... "What are you going to wear to the banquet?" Amen.