

How Worship Ought to Make Us Worthy
Matthew 22:1—14; Psalm 106:1—6

Wow! What a party, right? I mean: the music, the fun times, the uproarious laughter, the witty jokes, the wine, the beer, the pâté de foie—not to mention the troops in the streets and the city burning down all around us. What a party! The guacamole dip was the best I’ve ever tasted. How about you? You were there, right? Remember that guy who did the card tricks, the dog & pony show, the way that friend of a friend—somebody’s cousin—how she just cut loose on the dance floor... And remember all those smug party-poopers who declined the invitation—how they were slaughtered while we toasted the happy couple! Wasn’t that the best? Wasn’t that the best party of all time?

Sometimes (and I’m guessing here from my own life experience) the stories we tell in the hazy aftermath of a party take on *A LIFE* of their own. Or maybe sometimes the stories we tell of some legendary party take on an exaggerated, overly-hyped *DEATH* of their own. We can’t always be sure. Even with the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 22:1—14, things get out of hand in a hurry and in a pretty absurd way. *Absurd* is the word, for example, when a king throws a party and no one of any social standing wants to schmooze. It’s also absurd to learn that after the king throws the party open to everyone with nothing better to do—**“both good and bad”**—that he’s suddenly outraged by someone who struts around in his pajamas. For that matter, it’s also politically absurd—a bit of an overreaction—for the king to send in troops and burn down the whole city. So I’m getting the impression that something else is happening—something other than a literal wedding banquet. Don’t you think? And I wonder if it’s about worship.

In Luke 14:16—23, Jesus offers another, less catastrophic and less absurd, party experience. And the fact that it appears so similar—and yet so different—makes me think he’s trying to say something about our worthiness. Consider, for instance, that it’s not **“a king”** who throws the party in Luke’s Gospel. It’s just **“Someone.”** And consider that when the original, so-called guests decline, they respectfully and politely send their regrets. And finally, with the story that Jesus tells in Luke, it’s not the good and the bad who are welcomed to the banquet hall; it’s **“the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”** And the reason I suggest that each of these party-stories is really about our worthiness is no one is worthy. No one merits, or qualifies for, an invitation. And yet, once they’re in—once we’re in—what happens then?

In the screenplay version of Jane Austen’s novel, *Emma*, there’s a party to which only the most well-connected families are invited. It takes place at the Hartfield mansion, and on a carriage-ride to the festivities, the Reverend Mr. Elton makes this cavalier remark. He says, “A party is just a party, but a party on a summer’s eve... hmmm.” And what’s implied, we learn later, is that Mr. Elton wants a wife. He wants a wife who will help him to climb higher in the society of affluent gentlemen and elegant ladies. Emma Woodhouse, however, is not interested in his advances—and I am a little sad and a little bemused to say that this particular clergyman has mixed motives for attending the party—and some of those motives are tainted by ego.

Now, if you don’t mind me saying so, our own mixed motives are showing. And when we come to worship on a Sunday, the chances are very good that we will occasionally miss the point. Are we worthy? Certainly not. But are we *being made* worthy? Are we being transformed?

“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.’”

Again, we need to be clear: this is a story that Jesus tells; and who is Jesus? Jesus is a particular, first-century Palestinian Jew, whom Christians believe to be the full embodiment of God’s steadfast love, abiding mercy and unfailing compassion. But nowhere is that more ambiguous than when he’s been stripped of his tunic by Roman soldiers and mocked. He’s mocked, according to Matthew 27:28, as they put ***“a scarlet robe on him”*** before stripping him down again. And so, as we read about this wedding robe in the story, please keep in mind:

- we’re never told what Jesus wore when he went fishing with his disciples and they cast their nets into the deep water.
- we’re never told what Jesus wore to the synagogue in Capernaum when he read the passage of Isaiah 61, saying ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...”***
- we’re never even told what Jesus wore to the famous wedding at Cana (in John, chapter two), when he turned jugs of water into the best wine yet.

And so, what I infer from this lack of wardrobe-information is that it’s not important. The literal show of fashion is irrelevant. Neither the pajamas nor the pin-stripe suit matter. And in the Ultimate Party of God’s Unmerited Grace, no one is going to tell the story of whether our jeans were stylishly ripped, or whether our dress was modest enough for polite company, or whether we’ve donned the same shirt two Sunday’s in a row. On the other hand—Colossians 3:12—14:

Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

You see, there's clothing— and then there's CLOTHING. And what I'm suggesting is that, through worship, God is providing us with opportunities to *put on* Christ; and the more we show up for those opportunities, the less susceptible we are to what happens in Psalm 106. Did you notice the shift? Psalm 106 begins in thanksgiving, but as of verse 19 there's this cautionary tale: ***“They made a calf at Horeb and worshipped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior...”***

Now, maybe this hasn't happened to you, but I've been drinking and playing cards with friends, who in this off-handed, nonchalant way mention a wedding invitation; and the kicker is, they assume that I'm invited too. Yet, I'm *not* invited. And typically, as I confess that I evidently wasn't close enough to the bride and groom's family to make the cut (and that's okay—I don't feel excluded) these well-meaning friends often try to downplay the invitation. They say, *‘We're just gonna go and make an appearance. We're probably not gonna stay long. Joe won't even wear a tie...’* And here's the analogy I'd like to make with Psalm 106 and with our being made worthy in worship: if, out of a sense of wanting to make others feel that they're not missing out on anything important, you and I downplay or diminish how we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ Jesus, we're not doing them any favors. In other words, just as the worshippers of Yahweh, after the exodus from Egypt, exchanged ***“the glory of God”*** for a lifetime supply of grass-fed beef and all the prime rib in the world, we're going to be tempted: *‘What'd you do on Sunday?’ ‘Oh, you know, we didn't have anything better to do, so we went to church. It was no big deal. We had tickets to the game but, ever since my sister's singing in choir..., ahh... she's wanted us to go. You know, just to make an appearance.’*

***“Praise the Lord!
O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever...”***

That’s Psalm 106, verse one—and we are invited to *THAT* party!

But here’s verse 23:

“Therefore Yahweh said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him...”

And isn’t that the *SAME* party?

Woo-Hoo! A couple decades ago, Sheryl and I were co-organizing pastors of a New Church Development; and during one of our praise songs, we hear this newcomer really let loose! Her name was Cynthia, and after that day, she gradually became this really strong and encouraging leader. And we were encouraged partly because of the parable she told of her life. She described, sitting on a barstool and watching television during the collapse of the twin towers on September 11th, 2001—and how on that day she decided to quit drinking and to stop doing drugs. So, into this elementary school cafeteria, where we worshipped, Cynthia comes with a completely sober sense of her need for God and her love for Jesus. Then fast-forward a year, and her step-brother dies from an overdose. She asks me to officiate at the funeral, which I do, praying and preaching; and everyone is sort of *blah*, sort of numb in response, gnashing their teeth over every word. Afterwards, Cynthia comes up to hug me and says most of her family and friends got really high before I opened my mouth, and that they’re probably going to ‘party’ into the night to numb their sense of loss and regret. And then, with a laugh and a big smile, she adds, “*Don’t worry. I’ll be standing in the breach... You know, like Moses, standing in the breach.*”

Let's face it. There will always be parties to go to. There will always be feasts and celebrations. Pageants and potlucks. There will always be debutant balls and homecoming dances. Retirement dinners and wakes. And depending upon who we know and how we are known by them, you and I will be invited. And, of course, we may even choose to host our own parties and invite the people to whom we feel the closest—or the people with whom we'd like to be associated. And yet, every Sunday, in this exercise known as *The Service of the Lord's Day*—Christian Worship—there's someone who, once upon a time, may have told you a story—a story with a little or a lot of exaggeration. A story that tends to hype what's actually happening:

- *Wow! What a party, huh? Remember how you came to worship, wanting to hear the sound of applause and you imagined it was for you? Remember how the prayers and the preaching and the songs were so entertaining and uplifting, you felt as if you deserved the joy? Remember how everybody seemed to agree with your politics? Remember when you put all that money in the offering plate and somebody noticed? Good times! What a party, right?*
- *But do you also remember that one person—I don't know who it was. It was the one who stood in the breach. The one who offered us the right clothes. They weren't **Versace**. They're weren't **Giorgio Armani**, **Ralph Lauren**, **Calvin Klein** or **J.C. Penney's**. They weren't even the clothes that King Solomon wore at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. They were the clothes meant for me and you both. They were the clothes we're meant to grow into. **"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."** [Matthew 6:28—29].*