**October 15, 2017**

**19th Sunday After Pentecost**

**What to Wear to a Wedding**

**First Presbyterian Church**

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1. Our understanding today’s gospel passage benefits from a translation of the context.
   1. There’s a big difference between the cultural expectations of first-century Palestine and 21st-century America.
      1. Not only about marriage, of course – but marriage is what today’s gospel highlights.
   2. Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a marriage feast given by a slave-owning king.
      1. Now, slave-owning kings were quite common back then.
      2. Fortunately, neither human bondage nor absolute monarchy is part of our day-to-day experience now.
      3. This isn’t to say we have wiped out oppression or tyranny on the face of the earth – far from it.
      4. But at least we call it a crime when one person claims to own another, and we do not permit anyone to have absolute power.
      5. They weren’t quite ready for “checks and balances” in Jesus’ time.
      6. The progress of 2,000 years will require us to alter our perceptions in order to hear and understand this parable.
         1. We also need to better understand how marriage was perceived in the time of Jesus.
   3. Scholar Kenneth Stevenson, who was Bishop of Portsmouth, in England, summarized marriage in the patriarchal tradition of ancient Judaism in his book “To Join Together”.
      1. Marriage in those days was comprised of three steps: first, negotiation of contract, then betrothal, followed by consummation.
      2. I find it hard to imagine that our very own John and Chelsie O’Flaherty, who were married just yesterday, went through that ancient Jewish pattern.
      3. What may be harder for us to imagine is that the contract negotiated was no pre-nuptial agreement; it was a financial contract between two men, the bride’s father and the groom.
      4. In the time of Jesus, women were exchanged like plots of land and herds of cattle – just so much property.
         1. The men owned them.
      5. The period of betrothal, then, was not so much a time in which two persons got to know each other better and grew closer in love – but a kind of “grace period” in which the groom could cancel the contract – for some justifiable cause, but without penalty.
      6. Remember that Joseph, when betrothed to Mary, chose not to exercise his option to wiggle out of his marriage contract.
         1. He could have, because she was pregnant, but he didn’t, by the grace of God and the provenance of an angel.
   4. In the first century women were valued for the progeny they bore.
      1. They would marry at age 11 or 12 or 13, and immediately begin to have children.
      2. Typically, they would have a child every year or so for maybe 10 years.
      3. Lots of these children died in infancy.
      4. And most of these women died by the age of 30.
      5. So the men would remarry – another teenage bride – again and again.
      6. It was not at all uncommon for a man of 40 or 50 or even 60 to marry again: each time a child bride, bought from her father.
   5. What of the actual church liturgy for marriage?
      1. Although there is mention of marriage celebrations here and there in ancient texts, the formal, standard, official liturgy of the church dates only to about the 12th century.
      2. What appears to have happened is that the tradition of holding a marriage feast was appropriated into the church’s liturgy.
         1. We have done this time and again.
         2. Some tunes of Christmas Carols, for example, were drawn from drinking songs in the mid-winter feasts.
      3. The cultural observance of a wedding feast became, over time, a religious one.
   6. We have no evidence of an official religious rite for marriage in Jesus’ time.
      1. Marriage was entirely a domestic and civil affair.
      2. If one were very wealthy, a rabbi, Pharisee or even High Priest of the Temple might be invited to attend, maybe even lead some prayers – but this was unusual, not the standard.
      3. This explains why there are accounts of Jesus performing miracles at wedding feasts, but no record of him preaching a wedding homily.
         1. There was no such thing.
   7. A man works out a deal with a woman’s father, and she is ordered to go and live with that man – someone she may not even have met.
      1. After a period of a year or more, the man decides that this is working out, and he and his contractual partner (not his bride, her father) lays on a feast.
   8. Remember, this was long before clocks and calendars were common household items.
      1. Engraved invitations were not sent in the mail, or via an e-vite to fellow bloggers.
      2. Messengers were dispatched – slaves, if one were wealthy enough to own them – to invite everyone to the marriage feast.
      3. Come to the feast; it’s happening right now, today.
         1. Everyone would come.
      4. In those days, ordinary people owned two changes of clothing: regular, everyday work clothes; and a festive garment, a wedding robe – something usually white, that was kept clean and unwrinkled.
         1. Most people did not own much more.
         2. When the messengers issued the invitation to a marriage, the recipients would round up the sheep, drop the weaving, run home to put on the wedding garment, and go to the party.
      5. What feasts these were!
         1. These festive gatherings frequently lasted for days on end.
         2. We get a sense of this kind of feast as being thrown at the return of the Prodigal Son: roasted fatted calf, music and merriment, giving of gifts, and lots of wine.
2. What relevance does this gospel passage hold for us, if marriage is so radically different in our culture and in our church?
   1. This may be hard for us to grasp, as we live in a culture with rapidly changing expectations.
      1. In the Palestine of Jesus’ time, everybody understood the standard regarding the wedding garment.
      2. Any resident of Galilee or Bethlehem knew that to come to a wedding feast was to wear a wedding garment.
   2. This parable seems harsh.
      1. Someone is thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for wearing the wrong clothes.
      2. Perhaps this parable is not about wedding party etiquette, but about **participation**, or the lack of doing it fully.
         1. There is the first group, who simply decline the invitation.
         2. And then there is the guy without the wedding robe, who refused to participate completely.
   3. If we were you the king, we would feel snubbed and insulted by these people, right?
      1. If we had the power, we might send those folks who offended us to the outer darkness.
         1. Or at least, we’d be tempted to.
         2. Come on, admit it.
         3. When someone offends us, we are tempted to retaliate.
      2. Now, here’s where it gets interesting.
         1. Remember, this is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven, a story of the way God acts in the world.
      3. God has invited us to be partners in the building up of that kingdom, on earth as in heaven.
      4. We are invited to the greatest feast ever imagined.
      5. And how many of us fully participate all the time?
         1. Precious few.
   4. The omnipotent God, who could reign down fire from heaven and smite us where we sit – God does not act like the king in today’s story, although God could.
      1. God does not enforce the dress code or punish us for not participating fully.
   5. When God is the host, God invites every one of us again and again, over and over.
      1. Sadly, as in today’s parable, not everyone comes – but everyone is invited.
      2. We are called to that feast of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
      3. This is the feast at which the disgrace of the people will be taken away from the earth, and when God will wipe away the tears from all faces.
   6. When God is the host, the food is rich beyond our imagination or understanding.
      1. Sometimes it appears to be quite simple – like bread and wine – yet we can be profoundly moved and transformed by this feast.
      2. When God is the host, we are nourished not just for the morning, but for the journey.
      3. For most of us, this sustenance lasts a week, for others it lasts a lifetime.
      4. When God is the host, everyone gets the same gift: the amazingly abundant, undeserved, and inexhaustible gift of love.
3. God calls us all to the feast.
   1. Few of us choose to show up in our wedding garment.
   2. Few of us are all in with our participation.
   3. But the invitation is always there.
   4. God demonstrates to us time and again - be in in Exodus or the Gospels - that God exercises a choice to love us.
      1. God changes God’s mind against raining down judgment.
         1. We get to exercise that same choice.
   5. As Paul instructs, we are empowered by God to choose how we receive inputs and invitations.
      1. We too can change our minds and look for the good in situations or we can throw a temper tantrum as the host of the wedding banquet in the parable did.
4. What will we wear to the Kingdom banquet?
   1. Let us join with one another trying on our garments, finding the way we like to say yes to the invitation, and encouraging others to find their own way to say yes to God’s invitation.