

The Wedding Feast People Tried to Avoid

Matthew 22:1-14

Sunday, October 11, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction

I don't know about poorly attended wedding feasts. As a young minister I once lead a funeral for a man who died of alcoholism. His sister was there, his wife wanted to come but she had too much to drink and took the wrong train. The funeral home staff sat with the sister so she would not be the only one there to say goodbye to her brother. Today, we look at an odd parable that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God, and ends it with that strange statement we've read elsewhere, "for many are called, but few are chosen." It's one of those statements that is similar to "the first will be last and the last first." It meant different things in different contexts. Here, in a complete turnabout from the concept of rejection in last week's sermon, we see today the basis for acceptance and worth in the Kingdom of God. Let's look at today's passage in Matthew.

Set the stage

Jesus begins this parable by calling it a description of the kingdom of heaven and compares it to a wedding feast; a powerful image considering heaven is elsewhere described as the "marriage feast of the lamb" (Revelation 19:7-9). A king has arranged a marriage for his son and sends out servants with invitations. In an absurd twist of the plot, everyone makes a series of excuses and turns down the invitation. Some of them even mistreated and killed some of the servants. The king avenges His servants and then sends out more servants with invitations for the general public. When the king surveys the guests at the wedding feast, he notices a man without a proper garment, and that man is thrown out of the wedding feast. The parable closes with the cryptic phrase, "many are called but few are chosen."

proper garments

Before we get to the main point of this message, a word about proper garments for a wedding feast. Most weddings in ancient times had a dress code and if a guest did not have or could not afford proper attire, it was provided for them. To attend without proper attire was disrespect. Noting that it is best to interpret Scripture with Scripture, I turn your attention to the sort of clothing described in Colossians 3:12: "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Scripture makes it clear that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) and cannot earn salvation by works. The Book of James, however, tells us that true faith is demonstrated as well as spoken (James 2:17). This man, without the proper garment, is someone who may have learned the mannerisms and vocabulary of religion, but his life betrays his lack of faith in the Savior, and he is ushered out of the feast.

the chosen in this setting

The main point centers on the last verse, the one with the cryptic phrase "many are called but few are chosen". We must remember that the Empire of Rome was in full strength in the days of Jesus, and many would have known how they gathered an army. An old book of sermon illustrations (6000 Sermon Illustrations #1859) describes this:

"Many are called, few are chosen. The expression is supposed to refer to the manner in which the ancients selected men for recruiting their armies. The honor of being chosen was esteemed the reward of superiority, and, among the Romans, was as follows: The consuls summoned to the capitol, or the Campus Martius, all citizens capable of bearing arms, from the age of seventeen to forty five. They drew up by tribes; and lots were drawn to determine in what order every tribe should present its soldiers. That which was the first order chose the first four citizens who were judged the most proper to serve in the war; and the six tribunes who commanded the first legion selected one of these four whom they liked best. The tribunes of the second and third legions, likewise, made their choice one after another; and he that remained entered into the fourth legion. A new tribe presented their four soldiers, and the second legion chose four. The third and fourth legions had the same advantage in their turns. In this manner, each tribe successfully appointed four soldiers till the legions were complete. They next proceeded to the creation of subaltern officers, whom the tribunes chose from among the soldiers of the greatest reputation. When the legions were thus completed, the citizens who had been called, but not chosen, returned to their respective employments, and served their country in other capacities. (Townsend)"

But in the kingdom of God it is the opposite. All those who respond are chosen. The "called" who did not get to be chosen are the ones that did not want to bother answering the call. We don't become chosen because of merit, because there is no way we can earn such an honor. The lowest, most unimpressive person you can imagine can respond to the Gospel of Jesus and thus enter the kingdom of God and become a member of the chosen. Peter describes the chosen as follows: *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy."*

Conclusion

The description reveals the most wonderful destiny that a person can imagine, given to people with no regard to their merits. It is a opposite of rejection, but rather acceptance of the highest form. To be chosen is the happiest of all conditions, and in the kingdom of God it simply involves accepting an invitation.