

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm

Part 4: Parable of the Wedding Feast

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I. Here Comes the Bride

We've tackled three of Jesus' parables thus far in our series that are particularly challenging to interpret or embrace. Today's parable, the Parable of the Wedding Feast, is no exception. It portrays a king who reacts violently when his servants are mistreated, forcing people to attend a wedding they weren't initially invited to – indiscriminately gathering both the good and the bad – and casting out a guest for lacking proper attire. What lesson could Jesus possibly be imparting about God, or our relationship with God?

As we've discovered, understanding the ancient context of the parable is crucial. It sheds light on the seemingly enigmatic and helps us find our place within the story, which appears to be Jesus' aim for us. What we'll turn up this morning may surprise you!

The parable is set during a tense time; Jesus has just made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and is openly confronting the religious authorities. Jesus is unguarded and confrontational, perhaps understandably so, knowing that some of his listeners would soon participate in his crucifixion.

Another important aspect of the context is the role of marriage in political alliances during Jesus' time. Royal marriages were not matters of personal choice but strategic moves to forge and strengthen alliances between kingdoms. This helps explain the king's fury at the invited guests' absence, indicating a refusal to endorse the political union – even rebellion against it – given their treatment of the servants.

The parable's rebellious guests likely represent the religious and political leaders who have resisted change and the inbreaking of God's Realm for centuries and are presently conspiring against Jesus. By this point in his ministry, these leaders had already made up their minds about Jesus. They're not accepting his invitations to join his movement. Jesus isn't seeking to win them over this late in the game. He's exposing their intentions to the crowds. He's also inviting the crowds to choose between following these religious leaders or himself.

Then who are the guests that the king eventually gathers? The reference to pulling them off the street, the good and bad alike, probably indicates they are Jesus' diverse followers, which include not only whomever the religious elite scorn, but even those his own followers struggle to accept – tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like.

This parable serves as a stark illustration of the clash between Jesus' generous, inclusive message and the exclusionary practices of the religious authorities and others of his time. But before we start condemning those who oppose Jesus' inclusivity, we had best consider who we ourselves may be in this parable, for no parable truly speaks to us until we locate ourselves within it.

The king clearly seems to be God. The bridegroom is Jesus himself. The dignitaries who were invited to the wedding feast but refused to come are likely the religious leaders of Jesus' day who resisted or opposed Jesus' ministry. Who then might we be in this parable?

Could we be those who are invited in off the streets – the good and the bad alike – who are happily donning wedding robes? I hope so! But there are two other possibilities to consider.

There is the person who is pulled in off the streets, but is then kicked out for not wearing a wedding garment. Hopefully, none of us resemble this person! Yet, Jesus clearly draws our focus to this person, as if he is trying to get us to look inwardly asking "Is it I?"

Before we can know if this person is us or not, we need to consider yet one more character in this story – one who is obviously in attendance at the wedding feast, yet of whom no mention is named. Can you think of who this person would be?

The bride!

I don't know what Jesus' Jerusalem audience would have thought about Jesus' seeming omission of the bride here, but I have a good guess about what the early church would have thought. Who is Christ's bride, according to first-century Christians?

According to the apostle Paul, Christ's bride is *the church*. (Ephesians 5:25-27) Christ's bride is whomever loves Christ and considers their relationship with him – now in the form of the Holy Spirit – to be the most important relationship in their lives.

If we skip ahead to the final book of the Bible – the Book of Revelation – we find that Christ seems to have a lot more brides than even his own church could contain. John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, tells us of a vision where an angel instructs him to write these words: "*Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.*" This seems to be a direct reference to our parable. John also tells us he sees 144,000 individuals standing before God's throne, all dressed in bright, white wedding garments.

That's a lot of brides! Yet John is actually speaking of a lot more brides than the number suggests. 144,000 is a symbolic number. In ancient Jewish mystical symbolism, 12 represents *completeness*. There are 12 months in a year; 12 tribes of Israel; 12 disciples chosen by Jesus. So, what is 144,000? It is $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. That is, "completeness" times "completeness" *times a thousand*! Surely, this number indicates that literally anyone who chooses to be part of God's Realm and live under God's authority becomes a member of the heavenly household as Christ's own bride.

The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that 144,000 is a literal number, not a symbolic one. Yet John makes it clear what he means just a few verses later, where he tells us more about this white-robed crowd: "I looked, and there was a great multitude *that no one could count*, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” (Rev. 7:9)

Back to our parable, if the church – or perhaps far more than the church – is Christ’s bride, then those brought in from the streets who are attired in wedding robes aren’t just party guests. They’re dressed to get married. Men and women alike, *they are Christ’s bride!* Jesus is speaking in metaphors, of course, but what a metaphor! He’s indicated a degree of love, loyalty, oneness, and spiritual intimacy his followers will experience with the Divine that is quite extraordinary.

So now, if God is the ruler, Jesus is the bridegroom, and everyone present who has donned a wedding garment is the bride, then who is this poor soul who is not wearing a wedding garment?

He seems to be someone who is offered a wedding robe and refuses it. He doesn’t want any part of this marriage. In other words, he’s someone who objects to the new relationship that is being forged between God and humanity – which includes all kinds of people who were not part of the original invitation or “old covenant.” He’s not refusing to wear a robe out of protest that *too few* are invited to become Christ’s Bride, but *too many*.

Before moving on, I invite you to take a moment or two and consider a question that Jesus seems to want all of us to ask: “Is it I?” Are there times when you don’t want to be identified with Christ, or Christ’s Church, precisely because of certain people who are also part of Christ’s Church who make you uncomfortable?

II. Will you say, “I do”?

I must confess that there are at least two reasons why I occasionally push back on donning a wedding robe and being identified as a Christian, or part of Christ’s Church.

First, when I consider all the people who call themselves “Christian,” yet who believe or behave in ways that seem utterly antithetical to the true faith of Jesus, I sometimes wonder if my “wedding robe” still fits. I have issues with those on the Far Right in Christianity and on the Far Left. Both sides seem too angry and full of self-righteous indignation toward others to make me want to take part in the revolution they envision. Yet I’m also no Moderate. In fact, I probably have more issues with so-called Christian “Moderates” than I do with those on the far Left or Right. I don’t think that Jesus’ major message was, “Be nice and stay out of trouble.” He was not crucified for encouraging people to be lukewarm about their faith.

So, I have a very hard time these days finding my place within the Christian Church. I’m fine with Jesus. It’s his followers that I have issues with.

Yet, just when I get all full of myself, quietly believing that I am among the remaining few who walk a “truly” Christian path, I encounter one particular follower who makes it hardest of all for me to be part of Christ’s family:

To cite Groucho Marx: “I don’t want to join any club who would accept me as a member.” While I don’t fit easily on the spectrum between Right and Left within Christianity, I do fit into the category of “Imperfect” quite easily.

For instance, compared to Christ’s love for those who were different from him, my love is highly imperfect. Compared to Christ’s generosity toward those who are in need, or his compassion, there is no comparison. When it comes to Christ’s wisdom or righteousness, we are on completely different levels

Really, it’s not just in comparison with *Christ* that I fall short. I know many people – including people who aren’t Christian – who are far more loving than I am; far more generous; far wiser, more righteous and more compassionate.

If I’m really being honest with myself, the biggest issue I have with Christianity and Christian churches is that there are too many people like me involved! My fellow Christians often make decisions that are as imperfect as mine are. They fail to live up to their own ideals as often as I do. And, while they can be quite warm-hearted and wonderful people at times, they can also be jerks, dullards, and misfits; they can be full of pride, envy, greed, gluttony and all the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins – just like me.

Yet, if I were to refuse to wear a wedding garment like the man in the parable because there are too many people like me invited to the wedding feast, as well as those who are unlike me who make me uncomfortable, I would experience exactly what that man is said to have experienced – the lonely, outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I wouldn’t be out there because God has cast me out. No, I would experience the outer darkness because I would have cut myself off from any possibility of community with fellow humans, other than the perfect ones (at least those who consider themselves perfect). Talk about a dull crowd!

What keeps me in the faith is Christ’s own teaching and example. Clearly, Christ wants his church to be full of imperfect people. The more imperfect, the better!

Does not Jesus say, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”? (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32) Does not Jesus challenge, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone?” Does not Jesus command us to love even our enemies, or tell parables criticizing servants who have been forgiven enormous debts who can’t bring themselves to forgive their neighbor’s much smaller debts? In this morning’s parable, does not Jesus observe that “the good and the bad” are all brought to the wedding feast and invited to don a bridal robe?

Admittedly, there are plenty of Sunday mornings where I could probably find God more easily by taking a nice long walk on the beach, or hiking in the mountains, or staying home, quietly reading my Bible and drinking much better coffee than churches normally serve. Yet, I continue to identify as Christian, attend church, and remain a minister within Christ’s Church because,

bottom line, my friend Lillian Daniel is right: “Any idiot can find God on a mountaintop – the real challenge is finding God in the company of others as annoying as me.”

I do regularly find God in the company of people as broken as I am. When I discover God within them, I can more easily believe and accept that God can be found within me, too, despite my many shortcomings.

If you ask me, this is the real magic of being a follower of Jesus. We experience not only the Reality that Christ loves everyone – including us – but we discover that *we* love everyone more and more as well. Including those who make us uncomfortable.

It is said that the longer people remain married and in love with each other, the more they tend to think and act in harmony. Similarly, the longer I have remained a lover of Christ, the more I find myself loving and valuing the very people who drive me crazy. I hope this means that Christ and I are acting more and more like people who have been married and in love for a very long time. Yet I also know that people still ruffle my feathers and get under my skin more than they should. When I find Christ loving such people far more than I do, however, I have found that this is no reason to shed my wedding robe. It is all the more reason to keep it on and wear it gratefully.