

“God Likes Weddings”

Matthew 22:1-14

Before I became a pastor, I was naïve when it came to weddings. I used to think a wedding was a simple affair. Boy and girl meet, they fall in love, he buys a ring, she buys a dress, they meet at her church and say “I do.” I was wrong. That’s getting married. A wedding is an entirely different proposition.

You fathers will understand. You have a beautiful little girl. An adorable little girl who looks up to you and adores you in a way you could never have imagined. I remember how her little hand used to fit inside mine. Then comes the day when she wants her belly button pierced and wants to date the jock who likes to party. You remember being the jock who liked to party and from that moment on you’re in a constant panic.

You worry about her spending too much time with the kind of guy who only wants one thing, and you know exactly what that one thing is, because it’s the same thing you wanted when you were their age. Then, you stop worrying about her meeting the wrong guy and you worry about her meeting the right guy. That’s the greatest fear of all, because, then, you lose her.

Wedding dress? Check. Flowers? Check. Cake? Check. D.J., photographer, and reception hall? Check. Oh yeh, we’ll need a preacher. Check.

Video film crew, ready to capture every second of your incredible day, edit it down to 22 minutes and air it on basic cable so that women everywhere can critique it and men with remote flip past it. Check. Just take one trip around your basic cable channels and you’re guaranteed to stumble upon any of a number of wedding –related reality shows.

In the entertainment section of the Plain Dealer, I read an article about shows I'd never heard of. "I Propose" follows nervous boyfriends as they plan the perfect way to pop the question. You've got, "Say Yes to the Dress" which features brides-to-be trying on expensive gowns and "Cake Boss" on The Learning Channel lets you admire the antics of an eccentric Italian family as they crank out expensive wedding cakes.

There's "Platinum Weddings" of the super wealthy and the less formal – "My Big Redneck Wedding." Then there's "Bridezillas", although I'd have to say over the past 26 years and hundreds of weddings, I've dealt with more "momzillas" than "bridezillas."

Our culture seems to be obsessed with weddings as when earlier this year everyone was invited to watch and help celebrate the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton.

Jesus was apparently fond of weddings too. Not only did he help cater one in Cana by providing some last minute wine, but he used wedding imagery throughout his preaching and teaching to illustrate important truths about life in God's kingdom.

In fact, in Matthew 22, Jesus gives us a wedding-themed parable in which the people involved have the opposite attitude toward weddings. If *we* are wedding-*obsessed* then those in his parable are wedding-*allergic*. Jesus tells us that a wealthy king has invited those special to him to a lavish feast to celebrate the marriage of his son. Only, rather than jump at the chance to attend a royal wedding, *everyone* on the guest list RSVP'd with a big, fat "no."

The king reiterated its extravagance: "Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast" (Matthew 22:4). In other words, "This party is going to be nuts! You don't want

to miss it." But still, nothing. The king sends more servants only to have them flatly ignored or mocked and killed.

Enraged at such apathy and violence, the disrespected king revokes their invites with an attack on their city and sends out a call for the rest of the world to attend his son's awesome celebration instead. With the wedding hall now full, the groom and father finally receive the respect they deserve. Now *that* would make for some reality T.V.

For most of Jesus' audience, and those of us who paid attention in Sunday school, the meaning of the parable is painfully obvious. A wedding feast was a popular way of describing the coming consummation of God's kingdom; that day in the future when the long-awaited Messiah -- the bridegroom -- would receive the honor rightfully due him and enjoy an extravagant feast of blessing and joy.

Yet, rather than be filled with honor and excitement for that day, rather than "save the date" and mark their calendars, God's people, like the guests in the story, simply couldn't care less. The bridegroom had appeared in the person of Jesus and rather than embrace him in anticipation of the party, God's people would eventually throw him on a cross. As a result, the feast, the kingdom, the new age of heaven on Earth, and the blessing from the bridegroom would be opened to everyone else. That's where we come in. That's where our 18 new members come in as they join our Divinity ministry and make their way at noon to the feast in our fellowship hall – hopefully the first of many.

We, beginning with the first disciples, are the "other ones," the "found ones," the "good and bad" ones Jesus talks about to whom the invitation to the wedding now belongs. The invitation has come to you and me in the form of the gospel, preached to us by other invitees

and applied to us in baptism. Our sins are forgiven. Our status is secure. Our RSVP for the resurrection is in the mail. We *will be* a guest of the groom at the great feast, on the last day.

And God's goal for us, as special guests, is to learn from those who were invited to the wedding but rejected the offer. God would love for some of that excitement and interest we seem to have for crazy cakes and pricey dresses today to be focused on what is in store for us. We should make the most of this special invitation.

So, what does that look like? Well, when it comes down to it, there are three aspects of making the most of God's kingdom invitation. First -- and this may sound painfully simple -- but *enjoy the fact that you've been chosen*. If the promises of God are true and the gifts we enjoy *now* -- like forgiveness of every sin, a mission-for our lives, and the power of the Holy Spirit, are just a glimpse, a snippet of what we will enjoy when the real party arrives, then we should be the happiest people on the planet.

Yet far too often, followers of Jesus Christ seem to have no joy, as though their invitation got lost in the mail. We get mad about the same things. We're distracted by the same things. We gripe, complain and worry about the same things. We live like the Bridezillas we love to hate on reality television: *bent out of shape about small things and letting it overshadow the big thing*. You know that, regardless of what happens, you're still gonna get to party. So lighten up.

Have you ever been invited to a truly extravagant wedding? You know, the kind where you kill time waiting for the bridal party to show up by guessing how much every over-the-top element must have cost, and your spouse says repeatedly, "Ooh! I wish we could have had that at *our daughter's* wedding!"

When invited to something so lavish, there's something in most of us that feels honored and excited, even joyful that we get to take part. The same should be true as we considered this invitation from God. We should feel excited to be involved. We need to get back in touch with the sense of awe we once had in knowing we are average people picked for an extravagant affair. Perhaps that's what David was attempting to do when he wrote in Psalm 51: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (v. 12).

A second way in which we make the most of this kingdom invitation *is by inviting others to join us at the feast*. Jesus' parable could not have been clearer. No matter who you are or where he can find you, God's desire is to see the guest hall packed to the gills on the last day with people enjoying the party that's been arranged for the Son. Jesus says that the king's servants "went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matt. 22:10).

A typical wedding invitation allows for what's called a "plus 1" that is, the invited and just one guest -- and usually no kids. After all, who wants to pay \$70 a plate only to see junior ask if there are any chicken nuggets and then run around the reception hall like a wild turkey? But God's invitation is different. It's not you "plus 1." It's you "plus everybody." Which is great for those of us who do enjoy watching the children at the party!

Again, earlier this year, the entire world was invited to watch and help celebrate the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton. Hundreds of millions tuned in. God is planning a party for his Son that is a thousand times bigger and a million times less boring. So who have you invited to the party? Who have you introduced to the kingdom? Start at home. Do your children worship with you? Will your spouse be sitting next to you? If not, why? When was the

last time you asked someone to join you at church and hear the invitation? 15 new members is not near enough. Let's get cracking. This will be, after all, a "can't-miss" celebration. Hear the invitation!

Last, we make the most out of our invite to the wedding of all weddings *by letting God be the bouncer at the door*. We tend to spend too much time in the church worrying about who's in and who's out. There's a lot of buzz about this now. Some wonder whether hell exists. Others are saying that as a God of love, no one will be excluded. Still others say there are conditions before one gets into the ballroom. Christians have been jabbering about this wedding feast that's coming someday for 2,000 years. And we even make the whole debate more personal. We bicker over who worships the right way, who dresses appropriately, whose theology is tightest and whose life is cleanest. The end result is that such discussions end up either robbing us of the simple joy of being invited -- weighing us down with largely unimportant concerns -- or stopping us in our tracks from asking anyone else to join us.

Who's invited and who's not is a God thing. At the end of the parable the king enters the party and boots one attendee for not having the proper attire. This guest's disdain for the king's dress code displayed a lack of appreciation for the party and love for the king. Many commentators believe it to be an allusion to the righteousness gifted by faith and gifted by God that allows us to enter and enjoy God's kingdom. That's likely. But the larger point is that only the king himself did the bouncing. He determined who was in and out. He'll determine who's wearing the righteousness of Christ. Our task is mostly to enjoy and invite. Others have put it like this: Found people find people. Invited people invite people. God sorts out the rest.

This world loves its weddings. One website estimates that in the United States alone some 70 billion dollars are spent on weddings annually, with the average wedding costing roughly \$25,000 to \$30,000. Didn't spend that much on yours? Don't worry, you can turn on the television and see someone who did. What would happen if the church became as excited about the party that awaits us as we do the one-day affairs we watch on TV and get invited to in the spring?

We'd be grateful guests. We'd be inviting others. We'd stay out of the unfruitful arguments and unnecessary details. We'd let God throw the party, and we'd simply look forward to it. After all, it's going to be incredible.

#523 – Let Us Now Go To the Banquet