

Matthew 22.1-14

so much depends
upon

a red wedding
garment

glazed with trim

beside the white
cake tier

True story, I walked into a Land's End store and found a dress to get married in, on sale for 30 bucks. But I do understand that, for a first-time bride, The Dress can mean so much more: an opportunity to exercise agency. To design for oneself, not only a garment and an occasion, but—at least in the imagination—a whole life. Sure, we can raise eyebrows at the excesses of shows like “Say Yes to the Dress,” now launched into its 24th season, but we can also feel a sense of protective anticipation for the brides it features. Does a wedding garment really matter all that much?

And then there is the whole wedding industry: the venue, the food, the music. Event planners sometimes assume that the church service, when there is one, should take a back seat to the overall “vision.” Difficult clients have given rise to the vocabulary of “bridezillas.” As a culture, perhaps we mistake the beginning of a marriage for the end in itself. The median cost of a wedding in the United States (not the average, the median) is \$24,000. What a beginning to life together! Am I wrong?

And yet the meaning of marriage still exceeds such pecuniary considerations: it's a commitment, a partnership, a union, a pathway that will lead through lands as yet unknown. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament use wedding imagery frequently to symbolize the love between God and God's people. The Song of Songs, Jeremiah, Ephesians, Revelation . . . and less flatteringly in the book of Hosea, where God's people are compared to an unfaithful wife. Jesus' first miracle in the Fourth Gospel takes place at a wedding, and then now, toward the end of his time on earth, he tells a series of parables about weddings.

In today's reading we appear to have, rather than a bridezilla, a kingzilla. I'll insert my standard parable speech here, that parables are not meant to be cozy little stories that reconfirm our standard morality. They're supposed to be upsetting. They're supposed to cause us to question the status quo. But even granted such leeway, this particular parable is a bit of a "horror show."¹

Hear me out. So a king, presumably one of the most important people in his corner of the world, gives a banquet and *nobody* comes? The sumptuous food is prepared and all is made ready, but it's game day, or the lawn needs mowing, right, and people are just too busy to bother? Hmm. OK, but then despite all this activity, folks are *not* too busy to mistreat and even *kill* the king's messengers, because *that's* going to end well for them. And the king is so enraged by his empty banquet hall and dead servants that he, yes, rallies his *troops* and destroys their city. Burns it to the ground, and then goes out and finds more wedding guests, because apparently after all this, the party is still on? And invites everyone, "good and bad," to the feast.

But just when you think things can't get any weirder, some dude has apparently shown up in cargo shorts and a t-shirt. The king goes ballistic. "Friend," he calls him, "how did you get in here without black tie?" The guest can't seem to stammer out what went wrong; apparently "I don't own a tux" is not an adequate excuse. Whereupon the king orders him to be bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Now there is a standard sort of reading of this scripture, one with which you may be familiar. In that reading, the king stands for God. God invites a few of his select favorites to the kingdom of heaven but gets a big ho-hum in response. He doesn't want this great party to go to waste, so he invites more people, with less of a pedigree, and they are only too happy to crash the banquet. Commentators have made themselves into pretzels to say the king probably had a pile of appropriate wedding clothes ready, so the refusal of the guest to wear them is just insolence. Therefore, bring out the zip ties, because anyone like that deserves to be cast into "outer darkness" and eternal emotional distress.

¹ Writer and Episcopal priest Debie Thomas applies this term to the parable. *Christian Century* Sept. 27, 2017.

This is essentially the view that I first held. But my question for the text, and for you, is *Why do we jump on the idea that this kingzilla stands for God, and not a temporal ruler like the client king Herod?* What is it about our idea of God that makes us think the Almighty is vindictive and a bit petty? Or is it rather that this kind of reading shores up a sense of our own position in the wedding hierarchy? “Well, I would never be too busy to answer the Lord’s invitation.” “Harumph, I have enough sense to put on the wedding robe that’s waiting near the door.” Or worse, much worse, we believe that we rightfully belong in the outer darkness to which we think we’ve been assigned.

I have to say, I don’t buy it. Or at least not as a neatly wrapped package. Remember that Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. And over the last few weeks, he has been steadily ramping up his attacks on those he believes are bad actors within the present structure. By the time Matthew is writing down these events, Jerusalem the city has indeed been destroyed, not by God but by Romans. By the time Matthew is writing down these events, Jesus himself has been taken captive, stripped of his garments, and put to death. Like the wedding guest, Jesus remains silent before the law, neither defending nor incriminating himself. Is it too much to believe that in fact he is the guest in this parable, who refuses the easy solution, the rich wedding garment at hand, the power and the glory with which Satan tempted him in the wilderness just a few short years before?

And so what will we make of this perplexing tale? In the chapter before this one, Jesus rides into Jerusalem amid shouts of “Hosanna,” save us! Five days later, the crowds will yell, “Crucify him!” But this Christ who stands alone offers us a glimpse of the kingdom of God, bearing witness to the love and finally the power of the One who sent him. He goes to the cross like a Lamb only to emerge victorious in the end. God calls us together, the good of us and the bad, and will guard and keep us like a shepherd. God will wipe every tear from our faces and swallow up death forever.

I couldn’t say it any better than the apostle Paul: 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all

understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.