****

**The Man with No Robe**

**October 15, 2017**

**Matthew 22:1-14**

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the Son of the King and the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

This is probably the hardest Gospel text I can think of to draw the meaning from, interpret, and then try to preach on. I wanted to just skip it and preach on a different text. That seemed cowardly. So, strap yourself in, here we go on Pastor Mel’s Magical Mystery tour of the wedding feast for the son of the king…

The King had invited his subjects to a wedding banquet for his son. When the big day came the king sent his servants to round up the guests, but they disrespect the king and send word back that they can’t or won’t come. The king sends more servants letting them know he’s already killed the fatted calf, the dinner table is set and everything is ready. This time they beat up the servants and kill some of them. Now, we’re supposed to believe while the food is setting out on the banquet table getting cold, the king sends his army out to the town where the guests reside, kills them, and then burns down their city. After this he sends more servants out to the highways and byways to invite more guests. Once you get beyond the shear impossibility of the timing we find a king who finally gets his banquet hall filled only to get picky about a guest who failed to dress appropriately. His tux must have been in the cleaners. The king has the man thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I mean where’s the good news here? Every commentary I read says the King is God the father and the Son is Jesus. The first set of invited guests are the Hebrew People, the initial Chosen People of God. The servants are the prophets God sent to correct the chosen people when they had wandered from the path of righteousness. Do we worship a God of such vengeance who will destroy the entire city because the people were too busy to come to his celebration? Where’s the loving God of mercy, grace, and forgiveness? Where’s the God who says we must forgive not 3 or 7 times, but 70 times 7 times?

Let’s put this story into a context within the timeline of history. Matthew wrote his Gospel after the Romans had utterly destroyed the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem. After witnessing such violence and devastation, it must have seemed to Matthew and his congregation that God was punishing the Jewish people for their sins. I can certainly see where Matthew is coming from, but I respectfully disagree with this interpretation of who God is and what God’s disposition is towards sinners. God did not destroy Jerusalem for their sins. The Romans did that because the Jewish sect called the Zealots started a fight they couldn’t win. How many times do we humans try to place the blame on God when we suffer the consequences for our own actions?

Matthew’s story goes from bad to worse. When the servants finally get the banquet hall filled, the king finds one person out of all these rag tag second string misfits who didn’t get the memo on the whole wedding robe attire. According to the commentaries I read, we’re supposed to overlook the mass murder the king had just committed and be filled with joy that he’s so inclusive. Why his banquet is even filled with not just the good, but the bad also. Doesn’t he show such mercy? It’s by grace these folks, who represent the Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity, are even allowed into the party. What a magnanimous God, er, king… For by grace you have been saved.

Oops, wait a minute… What about the guy without the wedding robe? If grace is for everyone, the good and the bad, why does he get thrown out of the celebration? I thought Grace meant our sins, all our sins, were wiped out. Someone forgot to tell that to this king. The scholars pretty much all agree this is the tension between grace and cheap grace. Cheap grace is the kind where you receive your forgiveness and keep on living the same way you did before God’s grace named and claimed you. There’s no repentance involved. When we Baptize we say the newly baptized person has been clothed with Christ and His righteousness. In this allegorical tale that’s the wedding robe, the righteousness of Christ. So, seeing no outward evidence of behavioral change the king pronounces our robe‑less man unworthy and has him removed. Here a good Lutheran would say, “Yes, grace is for all and God’s will is for all to receive and live under God’s reign, but God still expects fruit from the vineyard, to harken back to the past couple of allegorical stories from Matthew. Jesus said he didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. The law still stands, but keeping the law doesn’t earn your seat at the banquet, which, by the way stands for eternal life. We get that by grace as a free gift. Grace comes before the law and grace trumps the law…

That’s how most scholars and commentaries call the shots here in this gem. I read it slightly differently. You guys are going to get tired of me saying this, but the Kingdom of God isn’t just a faraway place in a galaxy far away at the end of time in the great by and by. No! The Kingdom of God becomes reality anyplace and everyplace where the minds and hearts of God’s people are under God’s rule. In case you forgot, that’s right here and right now folks… So, perhaps those first guests simply sealed their own fate because they refused to live under the gracious rule of our heavenly father. And what about our robe-less friend cast out there in the outer darkness? There’s something you should know about ancient wedding banquets. Most ancient people had only one or two sets of clothing. These later guests were street people and probably would not have even had a second, clean set of clothes to wear. No overflowing closets like at my house. Imagine how wretched and smelly, even gross those guests would be. So, when a rich ruler threw a banquet he furnished robes for all the guests. When PJ and I went to Hawaii she conned me into going to a 5 Star restaurant called Momma’s Fish Shack. With a name like that would you think it was a 5-star place? Anyway, we had just come back from driving the road to Hanna. For those of you who have not been there, the locals call this road the divorce highway and they highly recommend taking one of the many tour busses because there’s one hairpin curve after another and any man foolish enough to drive it surely faces the constant help of the backseat driver sitting next to him. Well it had been a long day and we were both hungry, so I was happy to stop at Momma’s Fish Shack to get a quick bite. I should have known this wasn’t just some “Fish Shack” when we pulled into the parking lot and were met by the valet parking attendant who promptly instructed me that I could not go inside in the tank top shirt I was wearing. He asked if I had anything else to wear and when I said I did not he said not to worry, when I get inside the hostess would see I received a proper shirt free of charge. That’s grace! Not to mention great customer service… That’s also how these wedding robes were handed out at ancient weddings. Not only were these secondary guests recipients of the grace of the king just to be invited, they were even furnished with the clothes on their backs. The king literally gave them everything they would need to be acceptable. All that is except this one robe-less guy. Since the king was providing everything, even the robes, by shear grace, this guy must have refused the king’s offer. As I thought about what that might look like in real life it occurred to me that we all refuse God’s free gift when we believe we can or must do something to earn that very free gift. By being robe-less, this man was saying in effect, I don’t need to be clothed in Jesus to be acceptable to God, I can do it on my own. We do that in so many subtle ways. Any time you hear a preacher or some evangelist say, “All you have to do is…” Stop right there and smile to yourself because you know whatever is said next is a lie. The truth is all you have to do to inherit eternal life is exactly nothing! Jesus already did all the work. From the cross He announced, “It is finished.” He didn’t say I almost finished and all you have to do is accept, or pray, or live righteously. No! He said, “It IS finished.” The result of you hearing those words is faith or trust in the God who said them. Because God has done all this for me, I love Him with all my heart and I now *want* to be the kind of person that will make my new parent proud and happy with me. Am I always perfect? Far from it, but I keep trying because I love the one who set me free from myself and my bondage.

May we be joyful guests at the best banquet ever thrown, by the most generous king. When we imagine ourselves as the kings guest, may we always remember everything we are and even the clothing on our backs has been furnished by that king of kings. May we be filled with thanks for the free gift of God’s grace that what flows from us is nothing except love for God and love for our neighbors. Thanks be to God for finishing everything needed for our righteousness. Amen!