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### **New Living Translation: Matthew 22:1-14**

Jesus also told them other parables. He said, <sup>2</sup>“The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. <sup>3</sup>When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come!

<sup>4</sup>“So he sent other servants to tell them, ‘The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!’ <sup>5</sup>But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. <sup>6</sup>Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them.

<sup>7</sup>“The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. <sup>8</sup>And he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren’t worthy of the honor. <sup>9</sup>Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ <sup>10</sup>So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

<sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. <sup>12</sup>‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

<sup>14</sup>“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

### **The wedding banquet that matters.**

A number of years ago, I was attending a scientific conference in Singapore. I

happened to be out and about one evening, wandering around the city. The

center of the city is extremely modern with a number of tall buildings. I went into a building that wasn't exactly a skyscraper, but I thought would be tall enough to see the skyline if I could get on the roof. The front doors were open, and people were coming and going. I went in, climbed about twenty flights of stairs, and did indeed find a way to get onto the roof. The view was stunning.

I was up there for about an hour before deciding to head down. I went from the roof back into the stairway. It was then that I noticed that the lights in the stairway were very dim. They had been quite bright when I had ascended the stairs. I figured that the building had closed while I was on the roof. I went down one flight, and just to make sure I wasn't going to be trapped in the stairwell, I tried the door to the top floor. The door was locked. I couldn't get out of the stairwell.

I went down another flight and tried the door. Locked. I tried the next couple of floors. The doors were locked. It seemed that I was indeed locked in the stairwell. My heart pounding, I continued down, floor after floor, and indeed, all of the doors were locked. There was no way to get out of the stairwell.

Eventually, I made it all the way to the ground floor – and that door was locked, too.

I'd like to change the subject – and talk about our Bible passage today. It's a story that probably all of us are familiar with, but there's something in it that's a bit odd. But first, it's one of Jesus' parables. A common interpretation of this parable is that it is an allegory in which a wedding represents judgement day, either the final day of judgement when the earth ceases to exist or the personal judgement day for each of us. The first interpretation is more common. The people who are invited first and won't come represent folks who were supposed to be rich, not with money, but rich in spirit – true believers who have lived Godly lives.

In this story, the king who is preparing the wedding banquet represents God. The wedding banquet stands for the site of the final judgement, when all believers stand before God. The king sends servants to go out and invite people to this wedding ceremony; this parallels the way in which all people will someday be invited to final judgement.

In the wedding story, some of the invited guests actually attack and kill the servants who are simply trying to get them to come to a wedding ceremony. Some scholars feel that, in particular, these servants who go out to collect the guests represent the prophets of the Old Testament. And when they are attacked

in this story, it is a reference to the mistreatment and rejection that the prophets of the Old Testament often faced from their own people.

When the king, who is God, orders that the killers' towns to be burned in retaliation, it is said to be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, something that some felt was a punishment from God. This punishment was a result of powerful religious leaders of Jesus' day rejecting the message of Jesus.

Now, when the invited guests won't come to the wedding, that is, when those who are invited to live with God for eternity turn out to be ungodly and undeserving of salvation, the king tells his servants to invite common people. Likewise, God invites all of us regular Christians to be with him for all of eternity, even though we don't proprot to be the most Godly people who ever lived.

Notice that the good and the bad are invited; indeed, some of us are deserving of salvation and some are not. Some scholars have suggested that more precisely, this means that there are members of the church, people who claim to follow Christ, who are frauds, no better than those who openly reject Jesus. So, just like the folks who were supposed to be the most Godly were frauds, so are some of us.

There is one odd aspect to this story about judgment, and it relates to this issue of fraudulent believers. Why would the king reject a poor man who doesn't own decent clothes? The servants were told to go out and get anyone they could find. Does God expect us to have the money to buy fancy clothes so that we can be saved? No, of course not. Remember that this is an allegory. Good garments refer to good moral values, i.e., living the way God wants us to. The man with bad clothes is really a man who has rejected the teachings of Jesus, despite claiming that he is a true believer. He showed up for judgement with the righteous, but he is not righteous.

So, what does this mean to us today?

Many of you know that I work as a chaplain at Boulder Community Hospital 2 days a week. Visiting extremely ill people or their desperate family members can be an extremely compelling experience, and so I am sure that you will hear more stories about my chaplaincy work in future sermons. But today, I want to talk about one woman.

She was in her forties and was dying from a cancer that had spread throughout her body. She was receiving treatment, not to be cured, but to extend her life as much as possible. You see, she had a daughter, a girl around

sixteen years of age, and this woman told me that her only reason for continuing treatment was to live long enough to be at her daughter's wedding someday. My job as a chaplain is mostly to listen. I offer empathetic support. I affirmed this woman's willingness to go through torturous treatments for the sake of seeing her daughter finish growing up and then get married.

But it might not happen, this woman said to me. They tell me that I might not make it, that they'll do the best they can, but I need to be prepared to not be alive when my daughter gets married.

Now, as a chaplain in a non-religious hospital in a town that's somewhat hostile to Christians, I am told to be very careful about acting too much like a Christian pastor. If someone has stated that they are Christian on their electronic intake form, or if they tell me they are Christian, then can I start talking about God. But only under these conditions. So, since this woman had not stated when she was admitted to the hospital or when I first began talking to her, that she followed any particular faith practice, I could only listen and offer emotional support. But then she asked me if I was a from a church.

I told her that I am a United Methodist pastor, that I serve a church in a small town called Pierce. Then she said that she was a Christian. She said that

she was okay with dying, but that she was afraid that her daughter would subconsciously blame her for not sticking around to see her finish school and get married. My job isn't to give psychological advice, but I suggested that she talk to her daughter about this. I said maybe you should tell your daughter that you very much want to be there for these things, but that you might not be able to. She said that she would do this. I told her to tell her daughter that even if she isn't at the wedding, she'll be with God – and she'll be watching the day her daughter is married.

I continued talking to this woman for a while. She asked me to pray with her, which I did.

Now, I always look at a patient's medical record before going to see them. My goal is to see how much of a support structure they have outside the hospital, and to get a feeling for just how sick they are. As a result, before I went into this woman's hospital room, I knew that she wasn't expected to live any more than a few months.

I'd like to get back to that stairwell I was trapped in in Singapore. When I got to the ground floor, that door was locked too, but there was a tiny glass window in the door. I peered through it – and I saw that there was a huge event

going on - some kind of banquet. I banged on the door and I yelled out. Then a man opened the door. Like all the other people at the banquet, he was an ethnic Chinese.

It turned out to be a Christian wedding dinner. I was embarrassed, and as I was trying to quietly slip through the large, crowded banquet room and out the door, someone touched me on the arm. A woman talked to me in very good English. She said that she was the mother of the bride, and that I was invited to sit down and have dinner. We're Christians, she said, and we're sorry you were trapped. I told her that I was perfectly okay and that I appreciated the offer, but – . She interrupted me, saying that she would really like it if I would sit down and eat.

Well, I wasn't exactly dressed for a wedding. I was wearing old cotton pants and an old tee shirt. I was no better dressed than the guy who was sent out to weep and gnash. But I was indeed hungry. And God doesn't actually care how we dress. So, I sat down and ate.

It was very nice being asked to a wedding party. But that's not the wedding party that's going to be the really important one. And the woman who was going to miss her daughter's wedding – well, I told her the same thing. I told her about



the allegory story in the Bible, about the wedding party that will happen on judgement day. I told her that she would make the wedding that was the most important one, and that she would be just fine.

She squeezed my hand and thanked me for spending time with her. I have no idea if she is still alive. That's what happens when you're a chaplain. You are given the extreme privilege of stepping into someone's life at a critical moment, and then, you step away and never interact with them again. The faces and the names become a blur. You know that most of these people will disappear from your memory.

But that woman who wanted to live to see her daughter get married? If I forget her, I'll be reminded when I see her again – at that wedding banquet at the end of time.