

Title: *A Kingdom for All*

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Just in case you weren't aware of it, plans for a Royal Wedding are currently underway. On April 29, Kate Middleton will live out her true-life fairy tale when she marries her handsome prince at Westminster Abbey in London. I won't ask for a show of hands of how many of you expect to be invited.

The gold-embossed invitations which have been sent to 1900 guests read "The Lord Chamberlain is commanded by the Queen to invite blank and blank to marriage of His Royal Highness Prince William of Wales, K.G. with Miss Catherine Middleton. The proper attire for the occasion is either uniform, morning coat or lounge suit.

A morning coat is usually black wool, although oxford gray is also acceptable. It is also a single-breasted curved cutaway front with tails that fall behind the knees, peaked lapels one button no hip pockets, welt breast pocket, four closely-set sleeve buttons.

Now when you get your invitation, you'll know what to wear. When I was working on this, I asked Connie Simmons if she had gotten her invitation yet. I thought they might ask her to cater the affair.

The question is, if you got an invitation, would you go? Burn my man card, but I think it would be something to see. It's one of those kind of historic events that if you got an invitation, you'd clear your calendar, cancel whatever other obligations or reservations you might have and get to London on that last weekend in April. Our invitation hasn't arrived yet.

Maybe the closest thing we have to a Royal Wedding in this country might be a White House State Dinner. Whether the President is of your party or not, if you got invited, you would try to go. There was a scandal in the early days of the Obama administration when some uninvited guests showed up at a state dinner for the president of India.

There is a difference between a state dinner and a royal wedding. A President may have to give a state dinner for a visiting head of state who he really doesn't like personally but is a strategic ally or someone whose support is needed in some other sensitive area of the world. It's all part of the rough and tumble world of diplomacy and international relations.

A King gives a wedding banquet for his son or in this case, the Queen commands the Lord Chamberlain to invite the guests to the wedding of her grandson because it's in honor of someone he or she loves. I wish Miss Middleton well and I hope she's prepared for all of the unique challenges she's about to face as a somewhat middle class commoner marrying into the royal family, something that not long ago, would not have been able to happen.

Jesus tells a story about a king who is throwing a wedding banquet for his son. He does so in an effort to illustrate an important truth about the kingdom. There are similarities between the Royal Wedding of Wills and Kate and the wedding of this king's son. In the case of Prince William, speculation has been rife for some time. The announcement was made in November (on

my parents' anniversary actually) that William and Kate had become engaged. Invitations were then mailed out a little over two months in advance of the date. Give people time to book their flights and make hotel reservations, contact friends in the area, et cetera. One difference is that for Will and Kate, we know the date and the time. In Jesus' day, people were told, "There's going to be a wedding. We don't know exactly when but when all of the preparations are completed, we'll send for you. Be ready."

There is another similarity between a royal wedding in our day and the royal wedding Jesus is talking about here. It is a political and a diplomatic event as well as the celebration of love between a man and a woman. I saw just a snippet of Michelle Obama being interviewed about her thoughts about the royal wedding. The interviewer then asked her if she would attend if invited. She immediately said, "Yes. She would."

That raised the question in my mind, "Why would Prince William and Kate Middleton invite the Obamas – or any other American President, for that matter – to their wedding. Do they really know each other? Do they have any shared memories? Is there any personal connection? Probably not, but it shows that the wedding is also a governmental/diplomatic function.

The American President would think he might be invited because of the "special relationship" which exists between our two peoples. The Obamas were not invited, but the Queen has personally invited 40 other heads of state because when a future head of state is getting married, it's not just a personal affair. You have to love it when pundits analyze the guest list to try to figure out who got snubbed and why and ask "is that right or not?" What business is it of theirs?

The king invites all the guests to the marriage of his son because it is a state function. The king wants to celebrate with his son, but he's also cultivating the loyalty of those who are invited. When the day comes for that son to rise to the throne, he wants for all of his so-called "loyal subjects" to know that this son is the rightful heir. He wants them to feel some personal connection to him and there's going to be some notice taken of who accepts the invitation and who doesn't. Those who don't come will be viewed as disloyal.

The invitations go out, the wedding plans are all in readiness so the king tells his servants, "Go get the guests. Let's Party!" The oxen and the fatted calf have been butchered. It seems to me that with a lack of refrigeration back in those days, what do you do with a cow once you've butchered it? You can't freeze steaks and bring them out some time later. You pretty much have to eat it then. It would be a rare treat – not pun intended.

All is in readiness and the servants go out to round up the guests and wouldn't you know that the guests started coming up with one lame excuse after another. One man went back to his business. He just decided his hum-drum, mundane every day tasks were more important than giving honor to his king. One man went back to look at his field. In Luke's version of a similar parable, someone says, "I've just bought a field and I have to go see it." Won't it be there after the wedding?

Another one says, “I’ve got 5 yoke of oxen and I’d rather see how they are at pulling a plow than watch your son get married and eat all of your fancy food.” That would be pretty offensive wouldn’t it?

Someone else said, “It’s my honeymoon.”

For those of you whose kids are married and you have memories of their wedding day, was there anyone on the guest list who didn’t make it and you were just kind of disappointed because it seemed like they just didn’t have a very good reason for not coming?

When Katie Hosking decided to break up with her fiancé, it was only 12 days before the wedding. Along with her parents, Katie had reserved a country club for the reception. With 150 invited guests, the cost was \$6,200. Club policy required 60 days notice for any cancellation, meaning the Hoskings were required to pay the full amount.

The family decided to have a party anyway. In place of wedding guests, Katie and her parents invited the residents of the Interfaith Family Shelter to a country club banquet. More than 50 close family friends joined 40 homeless people, and together they danced and feasted on baron of beef, salmon, shrimp cocktail, fettuccine, and fruit. Strawberry shortcake replaced wedding cake. Afterwards they packed up the leftover food and sent it back to the shelter. It was enough to feed the homeless for several more days.

When it was over, the almost-bride, Katie, said, “We had so much fun!” Katie and her parents made lemons out of lemonade. They put the best face they could on a difficult situation.

Not only did the king’s “loyal subjects” blow off his invitation for trivial-sounding reasons, some of them seized the servants and killed them. Isn’t that interesting? Doesn’t that seem like an over-the-top way to get out of going to a wedding? Maybe they really didn’t want to have to bring a gift.

This is a parable but there are elements of allegory in it. Notice what it is that the king is inviting the people to. It’s a banquet. There are a couple of banquets here this time of year that I greatly enjoy – the banquet for Camp David of the Ozarks, and the banquet for the Pregnancy Resource Center of Rolla. Two local ministries that the community really gets behind and supports. It’s usually a good evening with several people from our church and an opportunity to see friends from the larger Christian community in Rolla – larger from going to so many banquets. As enjoyable as the evening is, you do know when you go that there is a string attached. They’re not just giving you a good meal and bringing in an enjoyable speaker out of the goodness of their hearts. You know at some point in the evening there is going to be a financial appeal.

The king doesn’t even want any of that. All he wants is for the banquet hall to be full so he can have a worthy celebration with his son. He says, “I’m preparing the best meal any of you will likely ever experience and I just want you to come. There is the expectation of loyalty – that they will remain his loyal subjects and live together in a peaceful kingdom. He wanted to give them something good.

It reminds of how all through the Bible and in history, God has held his arms out to a people who stubbornly insist on going their own way. Isaiah says, “All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations –³ a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick;”

Rather than just saying, “No thank you. I’m not interested and going on about their business, which would be bad enough. The people who are being invited to this lavish party, turn on the ones issuing the invitations, mistreat them and kill them.

That’s a way of letting the people know the shameful treatment of God’s prophets and spokespeople across the centuries has not been ignored or forgotten. There is a context to the parable. This is the third in a series of parables that Jesus tells in response to being challenged by the religious establishment. They asked Jesus straight out where he got his authority from. On the surface, it looks like a good, straightforward question. But it was really intended to paint Jesus in a corner and put him in a no-win situation. He turned the tables on them.

He tells the parable of the two sons. The first one says, “I’d love to work in your vineyard today,” but never goes and the one who says, “I’m not doing that, but later relents and goes.” Jesus lets the religious establishment know that he’s had enough of their empty lip service which doesn’t do what they claim they’re going to do.

He tells the story of a group of wicked tenants who are given the opportunity to work in a vineyard and when the vineyard owner sends his servants to collect what is coming to him, they kill him as well.” They kill the servants, so the man sends his son thinking they will respect him, but they turn on the son as well and kill him. At that point, the religious elite would have no doubt that Jesus is talking about them and the reference is really not even that thinly veiled. Whenever you’re tempted to think that these parables are just some nice little earthly story with a heavenly meaning to illustrate some spiritual truth, remember that telling them got Jesus crucified. The religious elite knew only too well what Jesus was saying.

Now Jesus says that while all the king was wanting to do was to invite them to a banquet, they didn’t just politely decline the invitation, they turned and killed the servants. Verse 6 says, “He sent his army and destroyed the murderers and burned their city.” There is much scholarly speculation that his detail was added after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and makes it clear in very unambiguous terms that that catastrophic event was in judgment on God’s people for their rejection of His Son.

After a little destruction, the king says, “I’ve got all this food prepared. The banquet is ready but those on the invitation list don’t deserve to come. Go out onto the street corners and invite anyone you can find. Tell them there’s plenty and we would love to have them. They don’t have to do anything other than to accept the invitation. They did that and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Mark Buchanan is a Baptist pastor in British Columbia. He writes about going to the

Tuesday evening prayer service at Brooklyn Tabernacle. He says, "The Tuesday night prayer meeting at Brooklyn Tabernacle felt like skydiving into a tornado, exhausting and exhilarating all at once. I'd read about the meeting in Pastor Jim Cymbala's book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, but nothing prepared me for the event itself: 3,500 God-hungry people storming heaven for two hours.

Afterward, my friend and I went out to dinner with the Cymbalas. In the course of the meal, Jim turned to me and said, "Mark, do you know what the number one sin of the church in America is?" I wasn't sure, and the question was rhetorical anyhow. "It's not the plague of internet pornography that is consuming our men. It's not that the divorce rate in the church is roughly the same as society at large."

Jim named two or three other candidates for the worst sin, all of which he dismissed. "The number one sin of the church in America," he said, "is that its pastors and leaders are not on their knees crying out to God, 'Bring us the drug-addicted, bring us the prostitutes, bring us the destitute, bring us the gang leaders, bring us those with AIDS, bring us the people nobody else wants, whom only you can heal, and let us love them in your name until they are whole.'"

I had no response. I was undone. He had laid me bare, found me out, and exposed my fraudulence. I was the chief of sinners. I had never prayed, not once, for God to bring such people to my church. So I went home and repented. I stopped sinning. I began to cry out for "those nobody wants."

There's one more important detail in this story. Everyone was having a good time, but they noticed that there was a man there who wasn't wearing the appropriate wedding clothes. There are people who are timid about coming to church because they're afraid they don't have the right clothes to wear. That's not what's going on here. To me, the story makes the most sense if the king has the appropriate wedding robes that he passes out to the guests upon their arrival, though it could just be a reference to the importance of putting on clean clothes. If the king passes out the robes, it is a way of emphasizing that admission to the banquet is predicated upon the king's righteousness and not our own.

There was one guest who was called and invited, but didn't take seriously the meaning of the occasion. When he showed up in his own robes, he had to be cast into the outer darkness.

Many are invited few are chosen . . .

Preached at Salem Avenue. March 6, 2011 a.m.