

CALLED TO BRING

Our Mission

Matthew 22:1-14

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Very shortly, if not already, American troops will descend on foreign soil. They will try to eliminate or cripple the ability of terrorists to organize attacks on the United States. No matter how successful, American troops can not change the hearts of people. Military victories will not stop the applause and cheers over our misfortune. Hatred is the stranglehold of the Prince of Darkness. Only the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, can vanquish it. That Prince of Peace calls us to the battle. We battle with Satan for the minds and hearts of people. St. Paul said that our struggle is not with human beings but with wicked spiritual princes that carry out the plans of the devil. The inhumanity we see in this world originates there. As a church we need to partner with Christ and go where evil lurks to liberate people from the stranglehold of hell. We are called to go beyond these doors, beyond our comfort zone, into the neighborhoods and onto the turf of people who have not tasted the love and power of Jesus Christ. We're to *go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ*. That's our mission!

Many times Jesus spoke about the violent clash between God's kingdom and the reign of darkness. He told parables so that we could grasp different truths about it.

In Matthew 22, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. The king sent his servants to those who had already been invited, but they refused to come. The king sent more servants who spoke in detail about the feast, but some didn't think it was important. They gave priority to other matters. Others were offended. They seized, mistreated and killed the servants. The enraged king sent his army to destroy those murderers and burn their city.

Jesus had already fingered the chief priests and Pharisees as enemies of God in his preceding parable (Mt. 21:33-46). Now Jesus identified them as recalcitrant guests, at the

least. They had been invited to God's banquet. They got their invitation through Moses and the prophets. Now with God's Son present, the banquet was ready.

At a royal son's wedding most kings would feast with their leaders and nobles. Were not the chief priests and Pharisees the spiritual leaders and nobles? Wouldn't they be the most likely to attend a spiritual king's banquet? But they refused. They stood apart, challenging and criticizing Christ. They even plotted to kill him. Their ancestors had mistreated and killed prophets. Now they treated Jesus similarly.

The banquet celebrated the wedding of the king's son. If Jesus understood the king to be God and himself to be that son, what did he mean by a wedding?

Once John the Baptist was questioned about Jesus' popularity. His followers noted that everyone was going to Jesus. John said:

You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less (John 3:28-30, NIV).

John the Baptist called Jesus' followers *his bride*. He rejoiced in the connection people made with Jesus. He helped it happen. He understood that lives are wed to Jesus through faith. Jesus becomes their provision. Jesus becomes their security. Jesus becomes their life. People become his bride. In the book of Revelation, Christians are called *the bride of Christ*.

The religious leaders were watching Jesus gather his bride. They were seeing people healed in body, soul and spirit. But they were not celebrating. They were not celebrating and tasting themselves. They refused the banquet before them.

In every church I've attended or led, I've seen people miss the feast. They come to worship, sit on a committee and even do some service work, but they miss the feast before them. They can tell you what they do for God. So could the religious leaders. They can tell you what they believe. So could the religious leaders. However, they miss the freedom. They miss the joy. They miss forgiveness. They miss the intimacy and strength of spiritual fellowship. They miss the passion and compassion that comes from tasting God's personal love for them. They're religious, even devout; but something essential is missing. They are not enjoying the banquet. How tragic! I don't want that to be the case for any of you. I don't want you to just believe certain things about Jesus. I want his love and power to liberate you, heal you and direct you.

People don't need to come to a church or some religious event. They need to come to the banquet. They need to come to the feast where they taste the life God in his love intends for them. Jesus revealed that God's kingdom, God's rule, is like this great celebration where people are wed to Christ and find their life. It's a celebration feast. To attend the banquet is to share in the experience and the great joy.

In the parable, when the nobles balked and even attacked the messengers, the king sent his servants into the streets to indiscriminately gather anyone who would like to come. All qualified. Both the good and the bad were invited. The reputable and disreputable were included.

There is nothing that disqualifies you or anyone else from coming to this feast. Jesus glories in your coming, regardless of what your life looks like. He glories in your coming. There is one proviso, however. In the parable, the king came into the wedding hall to see the guests. He spotted a guest who was not wearing wedding clothes. The king became angry and had the man bound, thrown out and punished.

It was customary in the Middle East for kings to provide clothes to their guests for a special celebration. The clothes marked them as guests. It marked them with honor and it revealed the grace of the king. To refuse the garment was more than an insult. It was rebellion. "I won't be seen in your clothes" means "I won't be identified with you or your charity." Jesus included this custom in his parable. Do you know why?

There is a garment that Christ provides for us. He offers us his righteousness in exchange for our own. We surrender our sense of right and wrong, our sense of justice, our trust in our goodness to embrace his forgiveness and direction for our lives. Righteousness no longer becomes an ethical achievement for us. Instead, it is the gift of forgiveness and every change Christ is working in us. Ask a person, "Are you a Christian?" If they answer, "Yes, I go to church, read the Bible, pray a lot, and try to live a good life," they are wearing their own clothes. If they answer, "Yes, Jesus has forgiven me," they are wearing the wedding clothes. Ask them, "Are you going to heaven?" If they answer, "I hope so," they are wearing their own clothes. If they answer, "I ought to," they are wearing their own clothes. If they answer, "I'm working hard for Jesus, trying to be good," they are wearing their own clothes. If they answer, "I'm trusting Jesus' word, I'm trusting Jesus' promise," or "Yes, I'm forgiven," they are wearing the wedding clothes.

Whose clothes are you wearing this morning? Your own or the one provided by Christ? Can you talk about what Christ has done in your life, or can you speak only about what you believe and what you've done? Do you know the release of forgiveness? Do you know the joy of being declared righteous, of having someone else pay your penalty?

Our life at Bethany is affected by this parable. We are the king's team. We are his servants. The king calls us to go and bring people to the feast. Our mission is to *go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.*

To be part of this great work, you need to **accept the wedding clothes**. As God's servant, you will help people put on the same clothes that you've received. As a recipient of mercy, you'll show mercy. As a recipient of forgiveness, you'll forgive. As a recipient of patience, you'll be patient. As a recipient of love, you'll love your neighbor, despite the warts. Accept your wedding clothes.

To serve on our team, you've got to **attend the banquet**. You've got to taste what Jesus is doing now. You've got to partake in the celebration. If you don't, what do you have to offer? What can you share with others? What do you want to bring them to? We are not called to bring people to church. We are not called to bring people to our way of thinking. We are called to bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. He's the Savior, not us. He's the Lord, not us. He's the way, the truth and the life. Attend the banquet. Enjoy the feast.

At Bethany we will **act on our call**. We have the great privilege to go and bring people to this feast. We are called to bring them no matter who they are. Therefore, we will go and *pray* for folks. This is a spiritual struggle. We will pray for people to be liberated from the grip of darkness and deception. Second, we will go and *befriend*. We will be a conduit for divine love. We will be our neighbors' friends. Third, we will go and *serve*. Christ came to serve, not to be served. We will serve our neighbors. Finally, we will *invite* them. We'll invite them as God leads us. The bottom line is bringing them to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.

You are called to bring. We are called to bring. We may not terror-proof this world, but eventually we or those we bring will knock off some terrorists... not with bullets or bombs, but with the transformation of their hatred to love, bitterness to forgiveness, hostility to gratitude, violence to servanthood. We are at war. Not with people, but for people! Will you join up?