

**Living In The Crucible:
DRESSED FOR THE PARTY**

Matthew 22:1-14

*We are all welcome,
but you'd better get dressed!*

A sermon preached by
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Long ago St. Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans that “in all things God works for good,”¹ Ever since, people of maturity and depth have realized that our character is formed more by the hard times than the easy times. Their thoughts make for encouraging words.

Author and life coach Kemi Sogunle: “The tests we face in life's journey are not to reveal our weaknesses but to help us discover our inner strengths. We can only know how strong we are when we strive and thrive beyond the challenges we face.”²

Joseph Campbell, philosopher and theologian: “Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging.”³

Walt Disney: “You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you.”⁴

There’s an African proverb: “Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.”⁵

Even Jerry Seinfeld, the comedian, said in an interview last weekend, “If I had to trade in the experiences I’ve had in my life, the last ones I’d trade would be the really bad ones. Those I’d hold on to until the end, because those are the ones that harden your resolve.”⁶

You can find these quotes on t-shirts and posters from Pinterest and coffee mugs everywhere. We like these sorts of statements because they speak to us in our context in life. There is nobody listening to this sermon today who is not facing or has not faced some challenges. We struggle to get things right. We encounter obstacles to our well-being. We need some encouragement from somewhere. This year has been one challenge after another. But sometimes the hard times are the best times.

When I plan out my sermon series in advance, I often look at the assigned texts for the Sundays, to see if there is a progression or a theme that I think God wants me to pursue. The Gospel readings for October all come from the 22nd chapter of Matthew, and when I read these Scriptures early in the year, I thought, there is something worth digging into. At the time, I was thinking about the challenges we face all the time: death, disease, depression and anxiety, relationships and conflict—the stuff of life. I also knew we would be near the culmination of a very divisive political season. But that was before the pandemic hit and the subsequent economic collapse. That

was before people took to the streets protesting for racial justice. Now in our context we really need some words of encouragement.

In Matthew 22, Jesus is in a crucial time in his life. He is in Jerusalem for the last week before his crucifixion. He has already entered on a donkey, probably the day before. The adoration of the crowds turned quickly to challenges by the religious authorities. I think to understand these teachings, context is everything. These are almost the last words of Jesus. This is his last chance to get his point across. Maybe he is even a little desperate to be heard and understood. This moment is what it has all come down to. He is in the crux of his life and ministry. He is living in the crucible.

For this series, I took the idea of a crucible from a book by Rev. Dr. Peter Storey called *God In The Crucible*. It is a book of sermons that Storey preached during a crucial, life-changing, even world-changing period in his life. Storey is a Methodist preacher from South Africa. He was a chaplain in the Robben Island prison where political prisoners like Nelson Mandela were held. He was the pastor of the largest and oldest Methodist church in the country. He was the bishop of the Methodists in South Africa as well as president of the South African Council of Churches. South Africa was organized by a system of racist segregation and oppression called *apartheid* from 1948 to 1990. Storey's sermons on racial equality and justice were words of challenge, hope, and encouragement that people needed to hear. Along with Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu, Peter Storey helped dismantle *apartheid* and bring liberty and democracy to South Africa.

Here's what Storey says about the hard times: "If you want to know whether God is alive, don't go to the places of comfort and ease. Inquire rather in those places where the fire of testing burns most fiercely. Living in the furnace of *apartheid* forges a unique experience of God. It melts away cheap piety, until all that is left is something you know is *real*—someone you know is real. You discover that with you in that furnace is another 'whose form is like that of the Son of God.'"⁷ Living in the crucible is where you meet God; that's why the hard times are often the best times.

Let's meet Jesus in the crucible of his last week and see what he has to teach us. Today we learn about a wedding gone wrong. You've seen that

happen. You plan, and you plan, and you make arrangements for everything, and your hopes are so high, but then something goes wrong.

Twelve days before her wedding, Katie Hosking of Wenatchee, WA, decided to break up with her fiancé. Though it may have been for the best, Katie and her parents had reserved a country club for the reception. Club policy required 60 days' notice for any cancellation, meaning the Hoskings were required to pay the full amount. They were going to be out over \$6,000 and have *beaucoup* of food.

So 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 to the DJ and feasted on prime rib, 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!"⁸ Hard times can be the best times.

I don't think anybody was having any fun in the parable Jesus told. As he taught in the Temple on Monday of what would become Holy Week, he told a story about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He sent servants out to tell the invited guests that it was time for the banquet, but the guests ignored the invitation. They even mistreated and killed some of the servants. This so enraged the king that he sent out his army and destroyed the invited guests and burned their city.

Meanwhile, the wedding food was still sitting on the table, so the king sent more servants out and gathered a banquet hall full of whoever they could get to come.

This is not the usual sort of parable Jesus tells. What's going on here? I think it's helpful in understanding this story to look at a similar story Jesus told in Luke 14. There he is at a dinner in the home of a Pharisee, but it's much more laid back. In fact, when Jesus starts talking about the people who refused the invitation, he makes jokes, telling about a guy who can't come because he bought land without looking at it. Another bought some

oxen without trying them out. Another guy got married and his wife wouldn't let him come, like women had any power over men in that day and time. The plot is basically the same; the king still fills up the banquet hall with the marginalized people who were not invited at first, but it's a much happier story.

So why is Matthew's version so harsh? Again, context is everything. Jesus is in the Temple, squaring off with the scribes and Pharisees just a few days before they get him crucified by the Romans. The time is much more tense. So Matthew turns the parable into an allegory of the Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah. The king is God; the son is Jesus; the people who were invited first are the Jews. The servants are the prophets who were sent by God and rejected. Matthew could tell the part about the destruction of the Jews and the burning of the city because he knew what happened. In 70 C.E., the Romans finally destroyed Jerusalem, and many in the early church saw that destruction as God's judgment on the Jews for their rejection of God's Son.

Matthew is coming at this story from a very different perspective. Then there is the confrontation of the king with the guest, which has no parallel anywhere in Scripture. This poor guy heard about free food, so he crawled out of his cardboard box under the bridge and came to the banquet. It's unrealistic to expect him to clean up and put on a nice garment, isn't it? Yet the king (God) gets in his face, condemns his clothing, and casts him out of the party. And the punch line of the story is this statement: "*Many are called, but few are chosen.*"⁹ What does *that* mean?

At several points this week, I found myself thinking, "Why did I pick this text?" But here's what I think we get out of this story for our faith today.

Everyone is invited to the king's banquet. Some of the ones who would naturally fit in are not there. In fact, they reject the invitation, and they suffer punishment. But the Kingdom banquet is still full, because God welcomes everyone—as Luke put it, "*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,*"¹⁰ all of whom were outcasts in Jesus' time. We have our own list of outcasts today. Barriers to full inclusion are created by race, nationality, political perspective, education, poverty, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. But at the wedding feast of the Son, all God's

children are welcome at the table. Nobody is separated from the love of God. Everyone is invited.

During the second George Bush administration, there was a major banquet scheduled at the White House. By mistake, the invitation and a letter from Dick Cheney was mailed to Robert Kirkpatrick, an inmate at the Belmont Correctional Institution in eastern Ohio. Kirkpatrick was in prison for drug possession and escape. But he was grateful to get the invitation. He said, "I'm going to tell him that I'd be happy to attend, but he's going to have to pull some strings to get me there."¹¹ The good news is, God has already pulled the strings for you. You are invited. You can come to the Kingdom party, if only you will.

But once you come to the party, there are expectations. The grace of God requires a response. You have to wear the outfit. You have to dress yourself in righteousness. You have to be the child of the King that you were invited to be.

Scripture is full of descriptions of the clothes you wear to the banquet. Our favorite verse from Micah: "*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*"¹² In two weeks, we are going to talk again about the bottom line for Jesus: love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Try that one on for size! The Letter to the Colossians actually uses the garment language: "*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*"¹³ That's how you live the life of discipleship. That's how you stay at the table.

Pastor Carla Pratt Keyes preached a sermon on this text she called "Such a Terrible Story!" In it she told of a visit to a restaurant in Seattle called the Recovery Café. It is actually a church organization designed to give a safe place to people recovering from addiction and homelessness. The folks who run the café say, "We're all recovering from something. Consumerism. Grief. Depression. Arrogance. Church is a place that people recover." The goal of the Recovery Café is not only to help its clients achieve more stability in their lives; they also want to help them develop more excitement

and joy for living. So the atmosphere in the café is a celebration; there's a party going on!

There are three essential components to life as part of the Recovery Café. One essential is accountability. Members have to be drug-free for 24 hours before they can come in to the café. Another essential is community. There are check-ins every week, where folks share what they are grateful for, what they are feeling challenged by, and what plans they have for moving forward. The third essential is to give back in some way. Folks have to sign up to help prepare the shared meals or clean up afterwards. Everyone is expected to take part in these ways. If you can't wear the outfit, you can't stay. If you come in high or drunk, you have to leave for at least 24 hours. But if you can sober up and stay drug-free for just 24 hours, you are welcome to come back again. Pastor Keyes says, "Accountability, community, service, and second chances. The kingdom of heaven is like that."¹⁴

The world where Jesus told his stories was harsh and cruel: Roman oppression, religious corruption, poverty, the primitive nature of existence. That was his context, and it makes it all the more remarkable that he taught the way he did. He was living in the crucible.

The world we now live in has its own brand of harsh: pandemic, economic hardship, racial injustice, constant anxiety. Even with our advanced technology, we still live with death, disease, oppression and violence. We have our own crucible to live in.

Living in the crucible is harder, for sure. But in the crucible, no time is more important. No way of living is more crucial than the life of faith. What faith tells us is that by the grace of God, the hard times are the best times, when we can truly become what God created us to be.

So here's your invitation. Whatever you do, do not ignore it or refuse it. Clothe yourselves with love, and come to the party!

¹ Romans 8:28.

²<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/overcoming-challenges>.

³<https://quotabulary.com/challenge-quotes>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mara Reinstein, "Life's A Joke When You're Jerry Seinfeld," *Parade*, October 4, 2020. P. 10.

⁷ Peter Storey, *God In The Crucible: Preaching Costly Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 66.

⁸ *The Wenatchee World*, June 29, 2005. AP story.

⁹ Matthew 22:14.

¹⁰ Luke 14:21.

¹¹ John Bacon, "Guess Who's Not Coming to a Bush Dinner," *USA Today*, June 5, 2002, 3A.

¹² Micah 6:8.

¹³ Colossians 3:12, 14.

¹⁴ Carla Pratt Keyes, "Such a Terrible Story!"

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10545/such-a-terrible-story>.