

THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

May 6, 2018; Non-lectionary sermon

Song of Solomon 1:1-4, 2:1-7; Matthew 22:1-14

***“The kingdom of heaven may be compared
to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”***

Matthew 22:2

It’s a stiff, white card with an emblem printed at the top: three white ostrich feathers emerging from a king’s crown. If you’re up on your English heraldry — which I’m not, but I looked it up — you’d know that’s the badge of Charles, Prince of Wales. Printed below that symbol are these words:

“His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales requests the pleasure of the company of...(here, your name would be inserted) ...at the marriage of His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales with Ms. Meghan Markle at St. George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle, on Saturday, 19th May, 2018 at 12 noon, followed by a reception at Windsor Castle.”

In small print at the lower left:

“A reply is requested to: Assistant Comptroller, Royal Chamberlain’s office, Buckingham Palace.”

And, at the lower right, an instruction on how men ought to dress: “Uniform, Morning Coat or Lounge Suit” and, for the women, “Day Dress with Hat.”

That’s all there is to it — easily the most coveted invitation of the year. About 600 people received one — a good deal fewer than the last royal wedding, that of Prince William and Kate Middleton, to which 1,900 were invited. But that was Westminster Abbey. The Chapel of St. George’s, Windsor is a smaller venue.

Those who find themselves outside of the lucky 600 will be forced to watch the ceremony

on television — along with a couple billion other people around the world. And that’s just television. That figure doesn’t count those who will live-stream it over the Internet.

Given numbers like that, can you imagine opening one of those engraved invitations and responding to the Assistant Comptroller of the Royal Chamberlain’s Office with regrets? Unless you were scheduled for open-heart surgery or had to keep vigil by the bedside of a dying parent, it’s inconceivable that anyone would say no!

When you hear from a king or queen that “the honor of your presence is requested,” the best advice is: “Just say yes.”

In Matthew 22, Jesus tells a parable that turns that piece of advice on its head. In its circumstances, the parable is very much like the story of Harry’s and Meghan’s royal wedding. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” But that’s as far as the parallel goes — because, in this royal wedding tale, *everybody* sends their regrets!

Imagine if that would have happened with the 600 who were invited. What would Prince Charles do, in such a bizarre situation?

If he followed the pattern of the parable, he would ask his mother, the Queen, if he could borrow a few of her Life Guards — not lifeguards, Life Guards — the guys on horseback with the shiny silver breastplates and the swords. Charles would send these guards out into the streets of London, and start hobnobbing with those ordinary Britons who’d been camping out along the parade route. “You,” one of the guards would say to a woman in a Union Jack sweatshirt, wearing a button with Prince Harry’s picture on it: “You’re invited to the wedding. Come with

me!”

To a Japanese tourist with a camera around his neck, another guard would say, “Come with me. I’ll show you some unbelievable camera angles!”

To a star-struck American sorority sister from Minnesota, holding a sign that says, “Hey, Prince Harry, you can change your mind, there’s still time!” still another guard would say, “You want to meet him in person? That can be arranged. Come with me!”

That’s how it would go, one guest at a time, until every seat in St. George’s Chapel was filled. It wouldn’t be as sedate a crowd, but it sure would be an enthusiastic one!

Maybe that’s the point — because, in the biblical story, the guests who refuse the royal invitation aren’t merely lacking in enthusiasm. They’re downright hostile! When the king’s messenger shows up at one house, fancy invitation in hand, the invitee runs him through with a sword. When another messenger stops at another place on horseback, an angry mob drags him down off the horse and beats his head in with paving-stones. No, this isn’t a case of people who just don’t want to be bothered. This is open rebellion!

There’s an odd little epilogue to Jesus’ story, about one person who shows up at the wedding who just doesn’t have the proper clothing. It was the custom, in those days, for wedding guests to put on a special white robe for the occasion. This guy doesn’t have one. “Bind his hand and foot,” says the king to the guards, “and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Well, that sounds a little harsh, doesn’t it? We shouldn’t make too much, though, of the proper-attire thing. This is hardly a morning coat with tails, or a military dress uniform with silk sash and gold epaulettes. It’s a simple, inexpensive white robe: not hard for anyone to get hold

of, if they really care.

What Jesus is saying is that this man's a gate-crasher. Sure, most of the guests were plucked, randomly, from the crowd. But not this character. The others have invitations, however lately they may have received them. He doesn't.

Bottom line: it's still the king's party. He's calling the shots. If he says the guests wear white robes, the guests wear white robes. End of discussion.

If you pay attention to what's printed in the worship bulletin every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, you'll see a little item there called, "Invitation." I may something a little different each month, at that point in the service, but the gist of it is something like this. "I'm not the host at this banquet. Jesus is. What he says by way of invitation is that everyone who's baptized in his name, who knows him and who trusts him, is welcome to partake."

The only requirement is that we have to come with open and repentant hearts (that's what the white robe is all about: a symbol of innocence and purity). As long as we've honestly confessed that we are sinners, totally dependent on God's mercy, the glorious future of the heavenly banquet belongs to us, as though by birthright!

It's not like a human wedding, with its established protocol and pecking order. There's no seating chart — despite what we used to do around here at Lamington, back in Colonial days, when well-to-do members rented their pews. Christ's invitation to this table is radically open. Amongst those who sit down at the Lord's Table, around the world, are the rich and the poor, the nobility and the commoners, the old and the young, the ones who have it all together and those who are still picking up the pieces. You just have to be hungry and thirsty: that's all. You have to

know you can't meet those spiritual needs yourself, and you trust Jesus to be able to do it. That's it. That's all you need to attend this banquet.

No fancy, engraved invitation. Just a willingness to say yes.

Is there any limit to those who may come to the table? Well, there's a natural limit on the amount of bread on this particular table, of course, but in terms of the larger symbolism of this sacrament, the truth is no, there is no limit. Prince Harry and Meghan have just 600 invitations to hand out. At Christ's table there is no limit.

It's not even limited by the size or dimensions of the table here before us, nor by the square footage within the walls of this sanctuary: because what we celebrate here is a spiritual feast, not a physical one. There's no limit to the love our Lord Jesus offers to us on the cross, and seals for us by his resurrection.

Anthony de Mello was a Roman Catholic priest who came from India. He draws on rich streams of both eastern and western spirituality in his writings.

In one of his books, he has this to say about the bountiful love of God we come to know around this table — and, of course, when he talks of “the eucharist,” he's talking about what we Presbyterians call the sacrament of the Lord's Supper:

“Love [he writes] is not like a loaf of bread. If I give a chunk of the loaf to you I have less to offer to others. Love is like eucharistic bread: I receive the whole Christ — and so do you; and the next person; and the next.

You can love your mother with your whole heart; and your spouse; and every one of your children. And the wonder is that each stands to gain because love improves in quality each time the heart is given to another

person.”¹

Why are we so jealous about love? Why do we dole it out so parsimoniously? Why do we fear that it may run out one day?

Human love may well run out. But not the greater and most original love, the love of God. When we seek to conform our love for others to the pattern of God’s love — to the pattern of Christ’s self-giving love on the cross — it takes on something of the infinite, eternal dimensions of the divine.

So, that’s how it’s possible that we are all invited to the Lord’s Table. Because the food we eat here, the nourishment we take in, is not just the morsel of bread, the sweet juice of the grape. It’s nothing less than the love of God.

There’s nothing magical in these elements of bread and wine, nothing inherently transformative in their material substance. It’s all about the Spirit of God who accompanies this celebration, who hovers over it like a dove.

So I invite you: open your heart to the presence of God in your life. It is God’s own son, Jesus, who requests the pleasure of your company.

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¹Anthony De Mello, *Song of the Bird*; in *Anthony De Mello: Writings* (Orbis, 1999), p. 56.