

Weddings, Inc. *Matthew 22:1-14* | 10/9/2011

Wedding dress? Check. Flowers? Check. Cake? Check. Preacher, DJ and photographer? Check, check, and check. Documentary film crew, ready to capture every second of your incredible day, edit it down to 22 minutes and air it on basic cable so that women everywhere can critique it and men with the remote flip past it? Check.

Weddings aren't just private, family affairs anymore. They're now the hottest setting for entertainment on television, and getting some aspect of your big day featured on the small screen is arguably the ultimate accessory to the 21st-century wedding experience.

Just take a trip around your basic cable channels and you'll see. There's *I Propose* which follows nervous boyfriends as they plan the perfect way to pop the question. You've got *Say Yes to the Dress* which features brides-to-be trying on expensive gowns. *Cake Boss* on The Learning Channel lets you admire the antics of an eccentric Italian family as they crank out extravagant wedding cakes. You can peek in on the nuptials of the super-wealthy on WE's *Platinum Weddings* and then flip over to CMT for something *slightly* less formal with *My Big Redneck Wedding*.

Why so much buzz around brides and grooms? It's hard to say. Perhaps it's because everybody likes to watch a good love story. Or maybe many women with a remote control simply can't ignore a pretty dress and a well-planned party.

Jesus was fond of weddings, too. Not only did he help cater one in Cana by providing some last minute wine, but he employed wedding imagery throughout his teaching and preaching to illustrate important truths about life in God's kingdom.

In fact, in Matthew 22, Jesus gives us a wedding-themed parable in which the people involved have the opposite attitude toward weddings. If *we* are wedding-*obsessed* then those in his parable are wedding-*allergic*. Jesus tells us that a wealthy king has invited those special to him to a lavish feast to celebrate the marriage of his son. Only, rather than jump at the chance to attend a royal wedding, *everyone* on the guest list RSVP'd with a big, fat "no."

The king reiterated its extravagance: "Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast" (Matthew 22:4). In other words, "This party is going to be nuts! You don't want to miss it." But still, nothing. The king sends more servants only to have them flatly ignored or mocked and killed.

Enraged at such apathy and violence, the disrespected king revokes their invites with an attack on their city and sends out a call for the rest of the world to attend his son's awesome celebration instead. With the wedding hall now full, the groom and father finally receive the respect they deserve. Now *that* would make for some entertaining television.

For most of Jesus' audience, and those of us who paid attention in Sunday school, the meaning of the parable is painfully obvious. A wedding feast was a popular way of describing the coming of God's kingdom; that day in the future when the long-awaited Messiah -- the bridegroom -- would receive the honor rightfully due him and enjoy an extravagant feast of blessing and joy.

Yet God's people, like the guests in the story, simply couldn't have cared less. The bridegroom had appeared in the person of Jesus and rather than embrace him in anticipation of the party, God's people would eventually throw him on a cross. As a result, the feast, the kingdom, the new age of heaven on Earth, and the blessing from the bridegroom would be opened to everyone else. That's where we come in.

We are the "other ones," the "found ones," the "good and bad" ones Jesus talks about to whom the invitation to the wedding now belongs. The invitation has come to you and me in the form of the gospel, preached to us by others and applied to us in baptism. Our sins are forgiven. Our status is secure. Our RSVP for the resurrection is in the mail. We *will be* a guest of the groom at the great feast, on the last day. So save the day!

God's goal for us, as special guests, is to learn from those who were invited to the wedding but rejected the offer. God would love for some of that excitement and interest we seem to have for crazy cakes and pricey dresses to be focused on what is in store for us. We should make the most of this special invitation.

So, what does that look like? Well, when it comes down to it, there are three aspects of making the most of God's kingdom invitation. First -- and this may sound painfully simple -- but *enjoy the fact that you've been chosen*. If the promises of God are true and the gifts we enjoy *now* -- like forgiveness of every sin, a mission for our lives, and the power of the Holy Spirit -- are just a glimpse of what we will enjoy when the real party arrives, then we should be the happiest people on the planet!

Yet far too often, followers of Jesus Christ seem to have no joy. We get mad about little things. We're distracted by little things. We gripe, complain and worry about little things. We live like the Bridezillas we love to hate on reality television: *bent out of shape about small things and letting it overshadow the big thing*. You know that, regardless of what happens, you're still gonna get to party. So lighten up.

A second way in which we make the most of this kingdom invitation *is by inviting others to join us at the feast*. Jesus' parable could not have been clearer. No matter who you are or where you are, he can find you. God wants to see the guest hall packed to the gills on the last day with people enjoying the party that's been arranged for the Son.

A typical wedding invitation allows for what's called a "plus 1" that is, the invited and just one guest -- and often no kids. After all, who wants to pay \$100 a plate only to see junior ask if there are any chicken nuggets and then run around the reception hall like a maniac? No one. But God's invitation is different. It's not you "plus 1." It's you "plus everybody."

So who have you invited to the party? Who have you introduced to the kingdom? Start at home. Do your children worship with you? Will your spouse be sitting next to you? If not, why? When was the last time you asked someone to join you at church and hear the invitation? Let's get cracking. This will be, after all, a "can't-miss" celebration. Do you believe that? If not, why not?

Finally, we make the most out of our invite to the wedding of all weddings *by letting God be the bouncer at the door*. We tend to spend too much time in the church worrying about who's in and who's out. There's a lot of buzz about this now. Rob Bell is wondering whether hell exists. Others are saying that as a God of love, no one will be excluded. It's not new. Christians have been jabbering about this wedding feast that's a-comin' someday for 2,000 years. And we even make the whole debate personal. We bicker over who worships the right way, who dresses appropriately, whose theology is tightest and whose life is cleanest. The end result is that such arguments too often rob us of the simple joy of being invited or stop us in our tracks from asking anyone else to join us.

Who's invited and who's not is a God thing. You'll recall at the end of the parable the king enters the party and ejects one attendee for not having the proper attire. This guest's disdain for the king's dress code displayed a lack of appreciation for the party and love for the king. The point is that only the king himself did the bouncing. He'll determine who's in and who's out. Our task is to enjoy and invite. Found people find people. Invited people invite people. God sorts out the rest.

What would happen if the church became as excited about the party that awaits us as we do the weddings we watch on TV and get invited to in the spring? We'd be grateful guests. We'd be inviting others. We'd stay out of the unfruitful arguments and the unnecessary details. We'd let God throw the party, and we'd simply look forward to it. After all, it's going to be incredible.

So here's your invitation. And everyone is invited! Now it's time to get excited!

Pastor Keith