

“What Will I Wear to the Feast?”

The parable in today’s Gospel is, in essence, three parables joined together.

There is the account of the wedding guests who are invited but reject the invitation by abusing the messengers who are sent to them to proclaim its beginning. This is similar to the parable from last Sunday, where the tenants of the vineyard abuse and kill messengers sent from the owner and wind up killing the owner’s son, as well. We marked how the Pharisees and chief priests came to recognize themselves in that little story.

Today comes the parable about those not originally invited, but who get to come on the basis of a last-minute summons to attend the feast. Of them it is tempting to say that the Gospel coming to the Gentiles (that is, to you and me) appears to be something of an afterthought for God — a view we might understandably embrace if it were not for the corrective provided by the prophet Isaiah in today’s First Lesson:

<p><i>On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for ALL peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines. 7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds ALL peoples,</i></p>	<p><i>the sheet that covers ALL nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from ALL faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from ALL the earth.</i></p>
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Notice my emphasis on the word “ALL.” God included all people apparently long before Jesus told this parable. In this parable the later-invited guests do seem to be rather a hodgepodge of humanity, clearly identified by Jesus as ***“both good and bad.”*** Which makes the Gospel

more “Gospel-y” — it emphasizes not only the universality of grace, but the indiscriminate nature of God’s love.

The third parable-within-the parable concerns the man who comes into the wedding feast without a “wedding garment.” I find myself asking the question: “*What’s the big deal with the ‘wedding garment’?*” First off, “What IS a wedding garment”?

Richard Bauckham writes: “*For any such occasion [as a royal wedding] guests would be expected to wear clothes that were both longer than those worn by ordinary people on working days and also newly washed. Those who could afford it would wear white, but it was sufficient for ordinary people to wear as near to white as washing their poorer quality clothes could achieve. Poor people, who might own only one patched tunic and cloak each, would often borrow clothes for occasions such as weddings or religious festivals . . . There is no reason to suppose that, once invited, these people have no time to go home, to change their clothes, and to borrow clothes from their neighbors, if necessary.*”

There is some archeological evidence that, in some places, a wedding garment was provided by the host — perhaps a special tunic or similar device to designate the guests at the festivities. The emphasis of the wedding garment was on it being clean and special.

Then what’s the hang-up with this king in the parable who gets so bent out of shape by one guest not accepting his “special” garment? In our culture, where we wear cut-offs and sweatshirts to everything, it is a reaction that seems inappropriate. But imagine that you are invited to a formal function at the White House . . . even our shirt-and-red-tie President would surely be attired in a tuxedo. And anyone who attended would be expected to follow a similar dress code. We realize that someone like Beoncé or Jay-Z might well show up in something totally lacking in modesty; some country-western singer would come in cowboy boots and sequined jacket. If they’re famous enough, they’ll “get away with it” (because we do worship the cult of celebrity).

But if you or I were invited and showed up in what we're wearing to church this morning, I suspect that we would be kindly refused entrance. In our culture, dressing-up has become passe; it is viewed as elitist, snobbish, unnecessary, and downright anti-democratic. Celebrities do it for things like premieres and the Oscars, but they have money . . . if someone were to show up in church in formal attire, we'd wonder what they were up to, why they were putting on airs, and who they thought they were.

In Jesus' day, failure to put on a wedding garment — something of your own or borrowed — had powerful significance. Richard Bauckham: *“The man who accepts the invitation but, by wearing his everyday, soiled clothes, shows only contempt for the purpose of the occasion, is no more worthy than those who rejected the invitation. They spurned the invitation to the feast; he disdains the feast while actually attending it. In effect, he has not really accepted the invitation, since the invitation is not just to be physically present at the feast but also to participate in the king's rejoicing over the marriage of his son.”*

The significance of the use or non-use of this garment has nothing to do with social customs or community mores . . . the king is not reacting to some etiquette *faux-pas*. This is an insult! It says: *“I'll come eat your food and drink your wine. But I won't honor you as the host, nor your son's wedding as any kind of occasion that demands anything of me.”* So the king does not issue a Miss Manners “*tsk-tsk*” — He has his servants throw the bum out on his ear!

Now a few more questions come to my mind. What if this man did not know he was supposed to wear a wedding garment? Remember, these were people recruited from the street corners. When had he ever been invited to a royal wedding feast? Shouldn't we allow for him to have made an honest mistake, and give him the opportunity for correction before he is so rudely ejected?

The man is, after all, speechless when confronted by the king with the question, *“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”*

We normally take that to mean that, having been caught red-handed in his insolence, he had no excuse to offer. But could it not be just as likely that he was speechless because the question about some kind of “wedding clothes” is unintelligible to him? Does He even know what the king is asking for?

We assume here that the wedding clothes were provided by the king. Surely he saw that others were wearing the garments. Should he not have surmised that this was expected also of him? First, we do make that assumption, although nothing in the parable says that this is the case. It may have happened in some places; nothing suggests that this handing out garments was a universal, or even common, practice. Even if they were being handed out, would this street-corner round-up have known what to do with them? Or maybe he didn't accept one because he thought himself unworthy, not knowing that others coming in were from his same socioeconomic situation.

Even if he didn't know about wedding garments (admittedly unlikely) or that he didn't know what to do with one if he had it (even less likely) — wouldn't the loving thing to do have been to approach him, suggest that he had made a mistake, and perhaps a bit more strenuously impressed upon him the value of accepting and wearing the garment? Did they have to toss him out? Was his offense that bad?

Yes! And to comprehend just how bad, consider the situation to which Jesus tells this parable.

We are right on the heels of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the cleansing of the Temple. After that, as we heard two Sundays ago; Jesus is asked by what authority he did both of those? His reply, first of all, negates his opponents' right to even ask him the question, and then he tells the parable of the two sons (one who agrees to do what the father asks of him, but does not comply in action; the other who says no his father's request to work in the vineyard, but later relents and goes).

Then, as we heard last Sunday, he gives the account of the wicked tenants who presume they can own what is not theirs, and wind up with nothing — the meaning of which is plain to Jesus’ opponents: He’s saying that they will wind up with nothing in the Kingdom of God. And then this parable . . .

If we read this in light of what has been going on between Jesus and His opponents, we grasp the early part of this parable quite handily. Of course those first invited, who then shamefully treat the messengers with the good news of the feast’s celebration, are the same people who lost the vineyard! We get it. We may even like it. The snooty, legalistic, esoteric, classist hypocrites are getting their comeuppance! Hooray!

But the second and third parts give us pause, because the characters here are not so easily slotted as “the bad guys” or “the folks we love to hate” Indeed, on some level, they seem to be . . .well, look around! Are we not the ones invited second? Are we not the riffraff taken from the global street corners and brought into the kingdom? Sure, we would like to be considered as the part that makes up the “good” of the “both good and bad” of that group . . . but yes, those folks are we.

But we’re not like the no-garment guy! We are quick to point out that we are not like him at all.

Why did Matthew include this parable at this point in his narrative? To point us to two problems: legalism and (if I am allowed to coin a German word) Übergnaden.

The problem of legalism is that it essentially blocks the message of the Gospel — legalism argues that behaviors, not grace, is what matters. Typically, then, legalism becomes enmeshed in keeping score, making judgments on the relative worth of people, and setting up a spiritual caste system: You did this . . . you didn’t do that . . . you did this, but only six times, not twelve as I do . . . you avoided this, but you had on the wrong hat at the time . . . if you are part of this group, you are automatically assumed to be better at keeping certain statutes than if you belong to that

group . . . and on, and on ... We see all too well the problem of legalism; but there is a problem with some who look to grace: they come to assume that behaviors do not matter in the least! (Hence my coined German word).

The parable of the Wedding Garment then takes on deeper meaning. Daniel Patte expresses it this way: “... *the point of the parable ... is that acknowledging the goodness of God is not sufficient. One also needs to acknowledge the authority of God, an acknowledgment that finds expression in an attitude (wearing a wedding garment) that is different from the attitude of simply acknowledging his goodness. Without such an acknowledgment of God's authority and the will to honor him as motivation for one's actions, no participation in the kingdom (now and in the future) is possible.*”

God's grace is not the final word . . . “*Shocking!*” you say. “*Heresy!*” you cry. (I am reminded of the scene in the 1950's movie, Martin Luther, when John Eck shouts at Luther, “*Heresy, Dr. Luther! Heresy!*” and Luther responds, “*Heresy?!? It is still the truth!*”

Read the Epistles . . . St. Paul, St. James, St. Peter, St. John, the writer of Hebrews — all of them again and again and again come to a point where, having extolled the glory of grace, the virtue of forgiveness, and the joy of salvation, wind up saying, “*Therefore . . .*”

Grace is the penultimate word (and the word that gets done what God wants done); but how we respond is the ultimate word. And simple faith is not the full response. It is the necessary response; but not the full one.

The refusal to put on the wedding garment meant that what this man was saying, and what we wind up saying to God all too often, is “*It's not everything You want, but it's good enough.*” To which God says to this man — and to us — “*Friend* (please note, we are, no matter what, God's friends, because He calls us that, not because we have it coming), *how did you get in here?*”

We want to answer, “*By Your invitation, of course.*” But we wind up

speechless before Him because we know that this is not the adequate answer. Nor is the answer, “*By what I did,*” or some other equally smarmy palaver. All too often we try to stand before God clothed in our righteousness, not His. But tell me: are you comfortable showing up at God’s feast wearing your behaviors from this past week? Do you want on display your prejudices, your hatreds, your anger, your lust, your jealousy, your misuse of God’s name, your greed, your conniving, your depression, your unspiritual nature?

Listen to St. Paul (today’s Second Lesson) “. . . *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice.*”

But we don’t put it into practice. We get caught up looking for how the other person lied . . . we focus on what is base . . . pursue the wrong . . . we’re seduced by the immoral . . . captivated by the ugly . . . centered on where we can pick fault. We fall into the very trap for which we despise the Pharisees . . . we begin to think that grace is our due . . . and that others do not deserve to have God’s grace. We stratify . . . categorize . . . ostracize . . . criticize — when the call of the Gospel is to unify, include, embrace, and uplift. Because our focus is not on honoring God . . . the focus has shifted to honoring ME.

Each time we come to this moment of communion, we hear the grace-filled invitation: “*Take eat . . . take drink . . . for you . . . for the forgiveness of sins.*” We think, how blessed am I. And indeed we are.

But listen to Martin Luther: “*The significance of, or effect of, this sacrament is the community of all the saints . . . When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortune of the community . . . Your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ and his needy ones . . . Through believing the Word which the soul takes and receives*

into itself, we eat the Lord. My neighbor in turn eats me together with my possessions, my body and my life; I give him this and everything I have and let him make use of everything in all his needs. In the same way, when I in turn am poor and in trouble and need my neighbor, I will allow myself to be helped and served. And in this way we are made part of one another so that one helps the other just as Christ has helped us.”

It is not about us . . . about what we prefer . . . or what we wish would happen . . . or what we think is good for us . . . or what we deserve — especially not about what we *think* we deserve. It is about the righteousness of God . . . and about His glory and majesty and power . . . and about His Kingdom . . . and about our need to submit to Him, especially when we are more than a little disheartened by what we see Him doing in our lives or in the lives of others.

The wedding garment is for celebration — celebrating the bridegroom who lives among us. It is a garment of praise. But it is also a garment of submission. We wear it in joy — but we put it on purely and simply because God gives it to us to wear. Even if we don’t like the way it seems to fit . . . we wear it anyway because it is, after all, His party . . . not ours.

Amen.