

A Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2020

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Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." Matthew 22:1-14

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:1-9

Society has some expectations about invitations; how they are sent, how we are to reply, and even what we are supposed to wear when we attend. So often there is an assumption about reciprocity as well. We make guest lists that are often based on who we need to entertain because they have recently entertained us. We have arguments about whose turn it is to pay for lunch. We accept an invitation and then insist on bringing along something to contribute to the meal. I resemble these remarks! When my sister says, come over for dinner, the first words out of my mouth are, "what can we bring?" When my friend says, "I'll make you a sandwich for our beach lunch," I immediately offer to bring some fruit. It's like this whenever I respond to an invitation. I automatically offer to bring something, and what I hear in response is, "Y'all come! No need to bring anything, just bring yourselves." Just bring yourselves.

It's ingrained in us to contribute. In general, that's a good thing for the wellbeing of society. We are all called to share what we have, to make use of our gifts to better our family, our church, our community. The problem arises when we mistakenly believe that our worth depends on what we can contribute. It's why we have such a hard time receiving hospitality; it's why we have such a hard time receiving God's grace. It's also why we are sometimes judgmental when others receive grace we don't think they deserve.

As we hear these parables Jesus tells to respond to the Jewish leaders who have been challenging his authority, the examples Jesus provides may make us more and more uncomfortable. There are two brothers who say one thing and do another when their father calls them to action, There are the tenants in the vineyard who not only won't give the harvest to the landowner, but kill his servants and even his son. In a case of magical thinking, somehow they believe that their actions will result in their receiving the inheritance of the son. Today's parable

of the wedding banquet is no easier to understand. This parable contrasts the sin and violence of the world with the banquet awaiting us in God's kingdom and invites us to respond. How will we answer the invitation?

This story, full of hyperbole, or exaggeration, is disturbing to many. It is disturbing that the king's invitation to the wedding banquet was refused or ignored by everyone who initially received the invitation. They were too busy with other matters and so made light of the king's invitation. It's disturbing that in his rage, the king sends out his troops to kill the murderers and burn the city. This story is especially disturbing at the end, when the king notices a man who was invited in off the street who was not wearing the right clothes. The king's treatment of this man is extreme, to say the least. We could spend hours talking about this strange parable, as faithful scholars have done for centuries, and still never make complete sense of all the details.

What if we consider this possibility? There is a feast called the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is at hand right now, all the time. Outside the door there is a world of violence, disordered priorities, apathy, selfishness, and self-righteousness. We have received an invitation to leave these aspects of the world behind and enter the kingdom, and we are going to need some new clothes, something appropriate to wear.

So, to use Paul's words from today's letter to the Philippians, wearing proper clothing might mean that we are to rejoice in the Lord always, let our gentleness be known to everyone, do not worry but in prayer let our requests be made known to God. We are invited to focus on the things in life that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable; to think about the things that are worthy of praise. It's not about what we *literally* wear; it's about wearing the love of Christ, the garments of goodness and righteousness from God.

If we are here today, we have accepted the invitation to feast in the kingdom of heaven, whether early or late, so the question for us is, can we accept God's grace-filled invitation? Will we allow the hospitality of God to fill us with good things? Will we believe that God's grace is not dependent on anything we do or don't do? Will we bring our full selves and attention into God's presence?

Like the improperly dressed guest in the parable, we probably all have times when we refuse to change into the garments of goodness and love that are given to us by God. Those times when we refuse to surrender our fear and resentment, refuse to let go of our attachments and addictions, refuse to respect the dignity of every human being. Those are the old comfortable clothes that we prefer to the new wedding garments, those are our insistence that we must bring something to the feast that proves our worth, that earns us the place at the table.

But our gospel writer is telling us that God wants it to be another way. God invites us to come as we are, good and bad, all sorts and conditions of people that we are. God's desire is that we simply say, "thank you, I'd love to attend!" and then rejoice in the feast of God's love. Because that love will change us.

And in the Church, we are invited to participate. It does not matter if worship does not go exactly as planned, or as we might prefer. It doesn't matter if we can't always join the mission projects or volunteer for everything that goes on in the parish. What matters is that we accept God's invitation into the here and now kingdom full of new blessings for us, new invitations day after day. And when we are ready, when God's love has begun to change us, then we can say yes. Yes, I want to be part of this banquet, I want to help prepare the banquet, I want to help serve the banquet of God's love.

Perhaps this parable is saying that God is not just looking for warm bodies. God is looking for wedding guests, who will rejoice and celebrate the gift of grace.

Perhaps this parable is saying that God has an amazing invitation for us that is not at all contingent on our clothing, but on our attitude; not dependent on our self-righteousness but on God's righteousness; not dependent on what we can bring to the banquet, but on God's grace.

The invitation to the heavenly banquet always comes to us as we are, but God loves us too much to let us keep on wearing the same old clothes all the time. We are invited to put on *new* clothes, to be willing to adapt, to change, to embrace the love and joy to which God is inviting us each and every moment of our lives.

The invitation is in the mail – y'all come, just bring yourselves!
Amen.