

The Wedding Crasher

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Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

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Scripture

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them 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."

Sermon

After reading this text, it might be difficult for us to say, "This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!" So, let's get right to the point. It's the question you're probably asking: *what's up with the robe?* Isn't the King overreacting here just a little? Couldn't he just politely ask him to leave the wedding? Maybe find a robe for the guy to wear? He was invited, after all, wasn't he? He received an invitation to attend the wedding feast. But he was a man of the streets, down and out, maybe homeless and obviously poor. How could he be judged for not wearing a wedding robe? And judged he was, bound hand and foot, and thrown out into outer darkness where he wept and gnashed his teeth. "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt. 22:14).

Maybe you wish that Jesus' parable ended with the wedding hall filled with guests, good and bad alike. We have a king who invites guests to a wedding feast, but they come up with excuses why they can't attend. The invitees even murder the king's messengers. The king is furious – he sends troops to destroy the murderers and burn their cities. Then he invites those in the eyes of society considered unworthy to be invited to such a lavish feast – the poor, those living on the streets, on the margins – with the finest food and wine. The story becomes an expression of God's grace, of welcoming the unworthy into the kingdom. In Luke's version, the parable ends here (Lk. 14:16-24).

In Matthew, we see what happens when the king arrives in the banquet hall to welcome his guests. That's when he eyes this poor man, this apparent intruder and interloper. "Friend, who let you in here?" but not really meaning "friend." It's more like a bouncer saying, "Listen, guy" or "Buster, who let you in here?" The man is speechless. Before he's able to utter a word, he's thrown out.

What's going on here? If you're disturbed and confused by this parable, then it's working its magic, doing what it's supposed to do. Parables are designed to surprise, shock, astonish, provoke, and make us uncomfortable. They cause us to sit up, take notice, and wake us up! They're designed to teach and help us see, hear, and understand in new ways. If it doesn't make sense, then there's an occasion to discover something new – about ourselves.

Matthew communicates indirectly through allegory. Not every parable uses allegory, but this one does. His readers would have known how to decode the parable, something like this: King=God; son=Jesus; marriage feast= great marriage feast of the Lamb of God at the end of time (see Rev. 19:9); slaves=prophets; those invited=Israel; violence=Israel's rejection of prophets; destroyed city=fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D.; gathering of good and bad=evangelistic mission of the church, welcoming everyone; wedding hall=church. [1]

But the robe, the robe has stumped a lot of commentators and preachers. Augustine (354-430) said the robe represented love. Martin Luther (1483-1546) derided those who saw it as anything other than faith; John Calvin (1509-1564) saw it as both faith and works. [2]

If you're sitting in Matthew's church and hear this parable, there's probably only one association you would have – *your baptismal robe*. The robe symbolizes the Christian life. Like other clothing metaphors in the New Testament, this garment represents putting on the baptismal garment of Christ. [3] The baptismal robe was placed upon you after your baptism, after having come up out of the water. There were two reasons for this: one practical reason was that you were baptized nude. The second is theological. Baptism points to dying and rising – dying to the old self and rising to the new self in Christ. It symbolizes putting on a new life. Putting on a new robe attests to the new life one has in Christ. The robe is the new attire of Christians who are now, as Paul put it, "clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). This verse from Colossians is often read at weddings, but it's

really a baptismal text. Again, this points to the new life one puts on in Christ. It's the robe that identifies us as different, and sets us apart, indicating that we're dressed for the part and not simply showing up for the food and drink, taking what we wish, and then returning to the streets unchanged.

Thinking about this text this week, I remembered a wedding reception I attended several years ago. It was held at Martin's West in Woodlawn (right on I-695), a massive facility that can host several wedding receptions at the same time. Walking through the place, I remember thinking to myself that it would be easy to go from reception to reception, trying out the different buffet tables, without anyone ever knowing. Not that I would ever do this, of course, but it would be easy to crash those weddings. There are people who do this on a regular basis. Several years ago, I was at a wedding in Washington, DC. My friends discovered that someone at the reception, which was held in a private club, was not on the invite list – they knew this person from their church. This person was getting married in a few months and probably crashed the party to check out the facility! And I've been thinking a lot about weddings these days. Some have said they just might be in Savannah the weekend Mark and I are getting married if they knew which square (Lafayette Square, by the way).

The sermon title – The Wedding Crasher – doesn't refer to the nameless man in the parable. He was invited, as we are invited by grace, into the banquet hall of the church. But unless our external lives demonstrate the difference Christ has made in our lives, then *we* run the risk of becoming wedding crashers, unfit for the wedding. "Many are called, few are chosen." Jesus' words echo an old Jewish saying, "Everybody gets called, but not everybody ends up worthy of it." Or, we might say in light of this text: "God wants everybody at the party, but not everybody wants to come or knows how to behave when they get here." [4]

More is required of us than merely showing up at the punch bowl, regardless of our attire. In other words, we cannot, as this man apparently did, bypass the tailor shop; you cannot skip baptism and its stripping away of the old self and the re-clothing with the new self that just is Christ Jesus. God wants a "wedding garment," God expects us to come dressed for the occasion, meaning with lives that reflect the one we come to worship, celebrate, and serve. Come dressed to serve, not just on the day of baptism, but every day we're a part of the church.

We can't take the gospel or our life in the church for granted. We're the recipients of amazing grace, invited to the banquet hall of the King. Very often, we're like the man; sometimes, we don't even know or forget that we are in the presence of God. Where is the awe? Where is the wonder? Tom Long, who was my preaching professor at seminary, has this image of the scene, "The other guests humbly, quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive garments of worship and celebration, but there he is, bellying up to the punch bowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt." In his self-absorption, he's forgotten where he is. Long says it well, in strong, maybe disturbing language, yet capturing the point of the parable. "...to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation

of Christ and then not to conform one's life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar." [5]

On Friday afternoon, I was at the Princeton University Chapel for the Inauguration and Installation of Dr. Jonathan Lee Walton, the new president of Princeton Theological Seminary. It was a glorious, inspiring, joyous, uplifting service (if you're interested, you can find it online at tinyurl.com/pts-president). The Gospel lesson that Dr. Walton chose was Luke's version of this parable. The focus of Luke's text is making the feast accessible to everyone. In his address to the Seminary, he said, "The urgency of our mission"—the Seminary's mission, the Church's mission—"is to make the theological table more accessible and our menu more inviting...we must go into the highways and byways, extending God's invitation to those historically marginalized and overlooked—expanding the table." Matthew's Gospel adds the story of the robe, the baptismal robe.

"Remember your baptism," Martin Luther often said, "and be thankful." The Holy Spirit and his conscience whispered these words into his ears. During times of enormous anguish and spiritual struggle during the Reformation, Martin Luther claimed the reality of his baptism and claimed his identity in Christ. "I am baptized. I am baptized," he said to himself. We could say Luther remembered his wedding robe. To be baptized means we have received an "altogether unmerited invitation" by Christ to be part of the church, called to live lives worthy of the God who has invited us to the feast. It's a life of serious commitment, but also joy, the joy of a wedding feast; a life that demands and requires ongoing change and transformation, of giving up the old self to take up a new self, new life in Christ. In some ways, our lives, together and alone, are all about growing *into* people who are comfortable wearing the garment of Christ – a garment none of us are worthy to wear, but wear we do, by God's grace, fit and fitted for the kingdom of God.

Sources

- [1] This is Thomas Long's helpful summary of the allegory/parable in Matthew (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 246. I'm indebted to Long's masterful commentary on this text.
- [2] Sam Wells, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, October 7, 2008, 20.
- [3] Long, 247.
- [4] Long's paraphrase, 247.
- [5] Long, 248.