

This is not a sleeper sermon – a “yawn-and-bear-it” sermon on another of Jesus’s parables about the Kingdom of God. No, today I want to invite you to consider a new perspective – a not so comfortable interpretation – of today’s reading from the Gospel according to Matthew.

Not once but twice in today’s allegorical story in the Gospel according to Matthew does the King – God – send for the wedding guests who had agreed to come to his Son’s – to God’s son, Jesus – wedding feast. And finally a third group is invited. Those initially invited represent Israel itself – those who had accepted the original call to be in covenant with God. The King’s slaves – the prophets of Israel – go out to tell the guests that all is prepared. This was the usual manner of such a feast. Those who were blessed to be invited were to be ready once the table was prepared. They had accepted the call and were to stand dressed and ready to come when called. Now, no excuses were offered. The guests were just unwilling to come. Refusing the King’s invitation was tantamount to rebellion.¹ The King was patient – still is. He sent another group of slaves who correspond to the prophetic Christian missionaries. You see, by Matthew’s time there had been an early not-so-successful mission to the Jewish community. This time those invited not only refuse to come to the wedding banquet, they abused and killed the messengers. By this time in the later part of the 1st century some prophetic Christian missionaries indeed had been killed.² How did the King react? He was patient when his invitation was rebuffed the first time, but when God’s messengers were killed, his patience was gone, and he reacted with wrath. He went to war, killing those who had rebelled. He burned their city – which was also his city. Likely the author of Matthew was writing retrospectively about the destruction of Jerusalem that was a judgment on the rebellious Israel for rejecting the Messiah.³

And all the while, dinner was waiting. Those who rejected God's invitation, both the Jewish people of old and new Christian Jews, had been judged, but the wedding banquet hall was still empty. So a third group of slaves – like the Christian missionaries – were sent out with a new invitation to all people, not unlike the Great Commission.⁴

And then...and then...there is the last troubling issue of the man who was not wearing a wedding robe. This part of the story is an addition to my and likely all our memories of the wedding feast. It is not in the wedding feast parable in the Gospel according to Luke. And it is not in the Gospel of Thomas that is an authoritative, though not canonical, parallel of the wedding feast story. What are we to think of the man who was turned away from God's banquet? What if his tux wasn't hanging conveniently in his closet in its protective plastic – What if it were still at the cleaners? (Who but my husband and our sons has dress clothes anyway these days?) Was he still worthy to come to the feast? Are we? Or was he a poor man who may not have had wedding clothes? Even if he had wedding clothes, surely he and we don't have to dress the part to be granted admission to the wedding feast?

I have struggled with this reading for much of my adult life, trying to reconcile my understanding and my misunderstanding of the wedding garment parable. As a child, I was excited to get dressed up in my Sunday best to go to church and often resented covering up my frills with my choir robe. As I took on the responsibility for getting my brothers and sister dressed and ready to go to church, I was old enough to know that God accepted us even when we dressed casually. I understood that in God's world there really is no dress code. All are called; all are chosen. Everyone is welcome at the table; everyone is accepted just as they are. The church of today is "Come as you are!" Right? Did I really need to dress my brothers and sister in their Sunday best? Did my own children have to be dressed properly to go to church and Sunday school? Our two girls were always happy to dress up for church. But I don't think I ever saw all three of our boys with their hair combed and their shirttails tucked all at the same time. And ...do I really have to wear closed toed black shoes in the chancel area, and do my Eucharistic

ministers and acolytes have to do the same? I am always so thrilled to have acolytes at the altar that I could care less what they have on their feet. I am just so thankful they are here. Our Lord wore sandals, so why do I beat myself up when I forget to put on my altar shoes? Why do I take out my dangling earring from my left ear on Sundays? Well, of course, Jesus's parable today is not really about what we wear, is it? We cannot take Jesus's parables literally.

In my self-righteous days I saw the wedding feast parable as our Lord's teaching on class warfare. We all know that the world is not a level playing field. There are still the haves and the have-nots in the world, in this country, in Florida, and even here in the panhandle. But is that what our Lord would have us take from today's parable? Is the Kingdom of God a place where the not-so-elite are welcome? I would go there in a heartbeat. In Jesus's teachings about the Kingdom of God, the elite did not accept God's invitation – too busy with big obligations. Some couldn't be bothered for what they thought were good reasons – soccer games, caring for a sick child or elderly family member who lives out on the farm – or maybe they just couldn't go because of their season tickets to their favorite team's football game. I've pondered these questions much of my life.

I ask myself, and I am asking us all, are we prepared to come into the presence of the Lord? Did we wear our wedding clothes? Do we approach the Lord's table as we always do, confident that we are prepared? We come to this table all the time. It is what we do on Sundays. But do we prepare? Have we been mindful of keeping all of God's commandments? Have we thought about what it means to ready ourselves to receive all of the Lord's promises? Are we wearing our wedding garments? Did we come to service today ready to hear and to listen and take to heart God's holy Word? Are we ready to attend the wedding feast? Are we ready to give our all to the Lord?

And have any of us truly been able to shake the image of God as a tyrant – the King who prepared for the Son's wedding feast – who didn't just turn the man with no

wedding clothes away but bound him hand and foot, but threw him into the outer darkness. Can God – would God – do that to one of his own children – to us? Surely the God we know through Jesus would not behave that way...surely not. I have heard this parable interpreted simply literally, as a wrathful God who rejects some and not others. Finding the meaning to Jesus's parables is sometimes difficult. Today's is perhaps more obscure than some. And that is why this is not a sleeper sermon. No. We have to work at understanding this parable – we have to look deeper. We must not embrace a comfortable easy, simple meaning to today's parables.

In first century Palestine, a wedding feast could take quite a while to prepare. A feast of this proportion could take many hands and many hours. A host would send his servants to invite the guests – no US postal service or email, no Facebook friend updates or twitter tweets. No, those special ones who were invited to a wedding feast were told to make ready in person. And then the servants would go out again to tell them when the elaborate dinner was fully prepared, and it was time to come to the party. With the feast prepared and the servers ready and waiting, the food was getting cold. The king's disappointment had grown into anger when twice his invitation was rejected. So he sent his servants out to gather up all the people – the good and the bad – to come to the wedding feast. We can imagine that these unexpected guests enjoyed a wonderful meal – except the underdressed fellow who was thrown out of the wedding feast. This has always been a problematic part of this parable for me. Having studied this text I learned that it was the custom of the host to provide his guests with suitable apparel. To not wear the provided garment showed more than a lack of respect and appreciation. There really could be no excuse for the under-dressed guest from the street not to wear the wedding clothes. So what of the guest who refused to wear the provided wedding robe? Who is he in this parable? In early Christianity, the new identity of conversion often was pictured as donning a new set of clothes – giving up the old way of life and putting on the new Christian identity. So the wedding garment would mean the robe of conversion, an outward sign of repentance for one's sins. By rejecting those “new clothes” the ill-clad

fellow was counted the same as those who rejected Jesus altogether. That was how he was treated; yet it seems inconsistent given Jesus's role of salvation. Perhaps Matthew was using Jewish hyperbole, but then he ends with the moral of Jesus's parable saying that "many are called, but few are chosen." Yes, many people and many different kinds of people will be in God's Kingdom, but those who overtly reject God's invitation and those who are accepted by God but who ultimately fail to accept God's hospitality and come ill-prepared to God's table – they will not have a place in God's Kingdom. Or might Matthew have been referring to the last judgment of the ones who reject God's son outright, or those who accept the invitation but cannot live like a Christian? Those ones are cast out into the outer darkness where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" – Matthew's favorite picture of the condemnation of the Last Judgment.

Jesus spoke using three parables about who will and will not be welcomed with open arms into the Kingdom of God. In today's parable Matthew made it clear who was worthy and who was not worthy. The judgment on the unworthy guest was swift and fierce just as God's judgment was clear for those who rejected the prophets of old and those who rejected his Son. Could it be that simple? It may be harsh, but it is that simple. We are invited again and again to come – to come to the Lord's table. My friends, we must learn to come – to come when we are called to God's feast. But we are to come – to come prepared when we take our seat at the Lord's table in the Kingdom of God.

Lord may it be so. Amen.

¹ See 2 Samuel 10:4.

² See Matthew 23:34, 37 and 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16.

³ Or this could have been Matthew's reflection on Isaiah 5: 24-25: "Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still."

⁴ See Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"