

Dress for the Party
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
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Texts: Philippians 4:1-9 & Matthew 22:1-14

Scholars call this a parable of judgment. Duh. It's one of the harshest stories Jesus tells, one of the most difficult to understand. I'm quite sure I don't understand it. But that's never kept me from taking a shot at an assigned text. It shouldn't keep you from trying either. I'm going to tell you where I'm going with the sermon, so that you'll listen critically and work through to your own interpretation. I think this is in fact a parable of grace, that all the stories Jesus told – even the harshest – he told to get at God's grace and how God's love is at work in the world, even when it doesn't look like love or feel like love. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is a parable about God's love and what happens to those who refuse it, who simply won't have any part of it, won't let it in, let it affect them, change them.

But first, some context. Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly ministry. The pressure's on. Three times now, Jesus has told his disciples that things won't go well when they get to Jerusalem. That he'll be arrested for the things he's saying, doing, revealing about God and God's community of grace. That he'll be crucified. They're in Jerusalem now, Jesus and his disciples. He's talking in this passage to the authorities, the chief priests and elders. Jesus has just told two parables that have angered them. Matthew writes – it's the verse right before our text this morning, "[The chief priests and the Pharisees, realizing he was speaking about them] wanted to arrest him but they feared the crowds, because [the crowds] regarded Jesus as a prophet."

Having gotten their attention, Jesus tells still another parable – this parable of the wedding banquet – to shake them out of their complacency, their spiritual blindness. This is why I'm insisting that the parables of judgment are essentially parables of grace. Some people won't turn back from walking off a cliff without being shouted at. So here, near the end, Jesus begins shouting a bit, even threatening, in order to get as many into God's party as possible. You take the cry, "Watch out! You're about to walk off a cliff!", put it into story form, and you get Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet.

...Which Matthew recorded as a kind of summary of God's saving grace at work throughout history. I think that Matthew took the parable as it came down to him and turned it into an allegory, in part to do a bit of his own shouting to the church in his day. Like the Israelites before them, the church had become complacent in its faith, even resistant to God's love. So according to a Disciples Bible scholar, Eugene Boring, here's how the allegory goes.¹ The first servants the king sends represent the Old Testament prophets who were calling Israel back to faithfulness, to get in on the preparations for the messianic banquet. But folks wouldn't come. So the king sends a

second group of servants. These are Jesus' disciples whom God sent with a more urgent message: "The banquet has been prepared. The party is starting. Come now!" This is the eschatological banquet that the Jews had been waiting for. The King, *God*, throwing a wedding feast for his son the Messiah, *Jesus*, to which the same guests are still invited, the *Israelites*, but who still offer lame excuses and refuse to come.

But the hall's been rented and the food's been prepared, so the banquet is thrown open to everybody, including the *Gentiles*, good and bad alike. God invites everybody so that the wedding hall will be filled. Some don't look very promising. They don't know how to act at a formal event. They don't have the right clothes. That's okay. Just come on! God'll provide new robes. This is the story behind Jesus' story. God's been trying to get the party started again ever since we insisted on being in charge of the party back in the Garden.

There are, however, two troubling details in the parable. First: the king sending his army to wipe out the guests who refused the invitation. May I remind you that this is a story, a parable that Jesus tells. And I'll remind you that, as I understand it, Matthew put his own allegorical twist to the parable. I know that for some of you, this is messing too much with your understanding of the Scriptures. I apologize. I don't intend to run roughshod over your own interpretation. You can have it as you are led to understand it. But here's my understanding.

Matthew wrote his Gospel after Rome destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Matthew had to account for this holocaust. How could such an enormous tragedy happen *after* the Messiah had come? Standing solidly in an Old Testament understanding that God allows terrible things happen to Israel when Israel wasn't faithful, I think Matthew thought it was appropriate to add his own twist to Jesus' parable – that the razing of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. were the result of Israel's unfaithfulness, its refusal to come to the party God was throwing for the Messiah. This was the king in the parable sending his troops to destroy the city of the unresponsive invitees. Listen, I don't believe that God causes these terrible things to happen, but we can argue that later. For the sake of our moving through this difficult turn in the parable, can we agree that whether God causes these things to happen or merely allows them, the result is the same: a lot of people suffer and communities are destroyed? Unfaithfulness has harsh consequences.

I want to turn to the other difficult part of the parable, maybe the most difficult. The wedding banquet has started. The band is warming up. The bar is open. Folks are mingling. The king arrives just before the cake is about to be cut. He notices this fellow who is not wearing a wedding robe. Everybody's lookin' good, but this one guy who doesn't have on the right outfit. I'm going allegorical again, because I think this is how Matthew means it. Matthew wrote to a church familiar with the language of dressing well. When the early church talked about dressing up, they weren't talking tux and tails and fancy dresses. They were talking Jesus. Putting on Jesus. Clothing themselves with Christ.

There's this wonderful passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians (3:9-14). I often use it at weddings. Paul writes, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another... forgive each other... above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." It's one of Paul's favorite metaphors, clothing ourselves in Christ. "Put on Christ," Paul writes to the church in Rome (13:14), meaning allow Christ Jesus – his way of being – to become your way of being.

Think of it as playing dress-up, like children do. Walking in their daddy's shoes, carrying their mama's purse. You know there's more going on in a child's play. It's one of the ways that kids explore what it means to be grown-up. It's one of the ways they experiment with the adult world. They try it on, literally. It's actually one of the ways children become adult. We thought they were just playing. No, they're becoming. This is what Paul is getting at. Becoming a Christian, Paul says, is the on-going, years-long, two-steps-forward-one-step-back process of playing at Christ-likeness, trying on Jesus.

Try it. Being kinder, maybe. Next time you're impatient, or the talking head on TV tempts you to think of the other as the problem, try it on, kindness. Next time you know you're right? Try on the cloak of Jesus' humility. Just play at not insisting on your own way, like a child playing dress-up. There's a closet full of Christ-like garments to pick from: generosity, gentleness, self-control. We're just entering our annual finance campaign. Try this on. Play at being even more generous next year. Consider increasing your gifts to the General Fund by five percent. We ask you to complete an "estimate of giving", not a pledge, so that you can play at being more generous. If extravagant generosity doesn't fit, you can take it off and put on something more suitable to you.

You mad at somebody this morning? Play at forgiving that person. Slip into the cloak of forgiveness. Look in the mirror, see what you look like when you're forgiving rather than begrudging. Believe me, resentment is not a good look on you. Grace may seem a little big at first, but you'll grow into it. I'll tell you, if you don't mind my saying: when you're wearing Christ's forgiveness – I've seen you in Christ's forgiveness – you're quite attractive. Very becoming.

At a wedding rehearsal a few years ago, a member of the bride's family arrived and told me exactly how everything was going to be: how the guests were going to be seated, where the wedding party was going to stand,. I said, "Hold on, lady. I'm the one in charge. Who do you think you are?" – *in my mind*. But I made a conscious choice. You can, too. I slipped on patience and graciousness.

You may think this sounds fake or hypocritical, playing at being gracious when really I was angry. But it's not. What do you think it means, all this talk in the Bible about transformation and maturity and our becoming a holy people, actually growing up in Christ Jesus? How do you think it happens for ornery folks like you and me, our growing up in Christ? I think one of the ways it happens is when we play at putting him on, when we experiment and let Jesus strip and re-clothe us with the kind of life he

lives, so we can see how it feels, what happens to us, what happens around us, when we dress up in him.

The guy in the parable, I don't think he got kicked out of the party because he wasn't invited or because he wasn't wearing the right clothes. I think he got kicked out because he showed up refusing to have allowed Christ Jesus to change him. I'm guessing that like all of the other guests, he'd been offered a wedding robe. He just refused to take off his old, filthy street clothes and allow Christ to re-clothe him for the party. According to this interpretation, the king throws the guy into the outer darkness because having accepted the host's gracious invitation the man has refused to let the host make him graceful. Maybe if the guy had just responded when he was asked, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" But he didn't say a thing, not a word. It's hard to imagine that a person could get this close to the wedding party and still balk, refuse to participate on God's terms, stand around drawing attention to his rebellious, anti-social self, and ruin the party for everybody else.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful little book, *The Great Divorce*, in which he describes how this can happen. It's a parable about folks in hell getting on a bus to go to heaven. They're welcome to stay, but once they get off the bus and look around – once they're met by someone who explains what they'll have to give up in order to stay – most get back on the bus, most choose to go back to hell. One guy, insisting that he was a pretty good fellow, simply wants what he thinks he's got coming to him, by rights, for his having lived a decent life. When he's told that he hadn't been as decent as he'd thought of himself – when he learns that in any case it's not by his good works that he's been invited to the party, but by God's good grace – he balks, "I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity," he says as he stomps off to get back on the bus. Another gets back on the bus upon discovering that an enemy of his has been welcomed in heaven; the man refuses to forgive and share the joy of a new relationship. Another, learning that she'll have to be exposed – stripped naked for all to see the person she'd been hiding from the world – she can't stand the thought of the vulnerability, just that brief moment when she'll shed her old clothing before Christ robes her in splendor. There's a clergyman too. He can't rid himself of his intellectual pride. This is the point of course. None of us can. We have to have it stripped from us, our false pride and all the other stuff that keeps us from enjoying the banquet in this life as well as the next.

God is gracious enough not to make folks come to the party. It's an invitation. God is also gracious enough not to allow anyone to ruin the great reunion: the singing and dancing, the eating and drinking; enjoying of one another's presence and the presence of God. Turns out, having been chosen to attend the party, we have some choices to make, too.

— Jeff Wright
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¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XIII, p.417