

“Save the Date – Dress Appropriately”
+ Pentecost 18 +
Isaiah 25:1–9; Philippians 4:1–9; Matthew 22:1–14
October 12, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

This past week I read an article about how people don’t dress up to go anywhere anymore – the theater, flying on an airplane, business meetings or church. I remember when I first began teaching 40 years ago I had to wear a tie in the classroom every day with my 3rd grade students and could not wear jeans even though a tie can be a weapon for an angry child and the female teachers were allowed to wear jeans. I mention this change in society and the gender inequality I experienced as a male teacher in the Primary Grades because the Gospel parable we just read, seems to suggest that there is a connection between what we are “wearing” and the kind of people we are.

The scene again is the Temple, the week that would end with Jesus’ death. Gathered around Him is a crowd composed of both admirers and critics; those who loved Him and those who hated Him. As I mentioned last week, these parables are particularly aggressive; they are targeted at the very men who behind the scenes are plotting to get rid of Jesus whom they neither believed was, nor wanted to be, their messiah. They got the message of each of the parables we’ve discussed for two Sundays and they didn’t like what Jesus had to say.

“So,” Jesus continues, “the kingdom of heaven is like a king giving a wedding banquet for his son.” In 2014 such a festivity would have included a “save the date” message a few months earlier but in Jesus’ time the “save the date” was not a particular date instead the people of the whole village were told that a wedding would be happening “when everything was ready,” which could be as long as a year away.

Nevertheless, the word had gone out and the great day finally arrived and the servants were sent out to deliver the message in person that everything was ready and the wedding was about to happen. It was much more simple: no clergy, no photographers, no professional musicians or printed programs: The bridegroom simply went at the head of a procession to the home of the bride’s parents, picked up his bride, a few words were said and then it was off to a

weeklong reception. That's why they ran out of wine at Cana—guests came and went all week and ate and drank and danced until finally, exhausted, they returned home back to lives that were usually pretty dreary. Oh, one other thing: the bride was veiled and dressed nicely, but it was the groom that everybody had their eyes on because he was the focus of all the attention.

So a royal wedding is in the works; the banquet is prepared, the servants are sent out to summon the locals, “but they would not come,” a problem that still plagues those who plan a reception and have no idea how many to tell the caterer. But this is bigger, much bigger. One of the worst things one could do in Middle Eastern culture is to bring shame upon oneself or to shame someone else. The avoidance of shame was the number one priority of every respectable man in that culture.

It is quite the pitiful picture this parable paints portraying the king – the KING shaming himself by sending out the servants twice to plead with the thoughtless guests who had shamed the King by not showing up. Did the King have no pride? Everyone listening to Jesus talking to in the Temple would have been aghast to think such a thing would happen to a king and certain they would never beg for guests. How intrigued they must have been at the audacity of those who declined. Dinner at the palace is “on the table” but those invited dismissed the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business while the rest seized the slaves, mistreated them and killed them.”

At that point, once again Jesus' enemies knew He was talking about them. He was talking about Israel's sorry history of killing the prophets who came to them proclaiming the kingdom of Heaven and inviting its religious leaders to come on in and celebrate and bring all God's people with them. Others in the Temple audience may not have made that deeper connection, but this was the second parable in a row where the servants were mistreated and slain. It had to make listeners wonder if it was connected to the palpable contempt pouring off the chief priests and Pharisees in the crowd.

Like any good story teller, Jesus presses on to the story's logical conclusion: a king will not be shamed; a king will redeem his honor; a king will send out his troops and wipe those ingrates off the planet—a horror story that came to pass some 40 years later as hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered by Roman troops when Jerusalem was burned to the ground

and the Temple trashed to its very foundations. Yes, this is a parable and a prophecy. Fiction would soon turn to fact. The twist to the story is that the king tries again, again risking his honor by sending out new servants to “invite everyone...both good and bad” so the wedding hall was filled with guests. So there is a happy ending after all for those who will listen, for those who would see the Prophet, Priest and King in the one telling the Parable – even those who would never have been allowed in the Temple that day – Gentiles, outcasts guests newly invited into the “kingdom of heaven.” It would only be a couple of days before Jesus’ enemies would become His executioners, but still He extends the invitation to them to see, to believe – an invitation to the bad as well as the good.

That’s the incredibly strange and gracious nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, redemption is always a possibility because God, “the king” of the parable is always approachable through repentance, when people change their direction and their hearts and minds and go on into the banquet already prepared for them. But then comes another twist, the twist most of us preachers would just as soon not have been included: a guest not wearing a wedding robe, speechless before the king until the king orders him bound hand and foot and thrown out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I had to do a little research on that one. I knew and was going to tell you that the custom of the day was that the host provided the proper attire. I was also going to point out that Jesus said nothing about whether that particular guest was well-dressed or still in some dirty smelly work clothes. But that didn’t quite do it for me so I consulted my best source, Boedecker, who informed me,

A wedding robe is what was called in Hebrew a *kittel*, a white linen robe worn by Jewish men to signify purity, holiness and new beginnings. Traditionally, a man first wears a *kittel* on his wedding day, thereafter on high holy days and ultimately that *kittel* becomes his burial shroud. Way back in the time of the Temple, the high priest wore a *kittel* instead of his golden vestments on the day of atonement, signifying the purity of repentance and forgiveness. Everybody Jesus was talking to knew what that wedding robe was all about.

And what it says about the man who was found without one is that he would have been given one but had refused to wear it, thereby shaming the king and rejecting the honor the king had done by inviting him. Stating, in his way, that he didn’t need that garment – didn’t need that King’s generosity – didn’t need anything he couldn’t provide for himself. He didn’t want to be all wrapped up in the King’s robe.

That would be like any of us saying, “I don’t want the righteousness Jesus earned for me on the cross. I’ve done enough good deeds to outweigh the bad. I’ve got this entrance into God’s Kingdom all taken care of – all on my own.” That is not how the Kingdom of God works. It is only when we have been “All Wrapped Up In Jesus” washed clean in baptism, redeemed, renewed and robed in His righteousness that we can come into the feast – the feast that will not end. It is then that we become messengers of God’s Kingdom right here and right now. We get to invite others. And we do that by example, by word and by deed and by welcoming both the “good and the bad” (however we define those words and the people we apply them to) into all these branch offices of the Kingdom of Heaven that we call churches.

Don’t worry about perfecting people or yourselves to make them fit for the kingdom—that job belongs to Jesus. We only invite. We welcome. We challenge. We encourage. And we do so in the confidence that our King Jesus has already prepared the banquet, as surely as we will shortly gather up here at the Table, to savor the flavor of the foretaste of the feast to come. Amen.

Now may our gracious Lord who has prepared His table before all the world, call us again to His banquet, strengthen within us whatever is honorable, just and pure, and make us faithful servants proclaiming His kingdom and inviting His guests.