

Pentecost 19A + October 15, 2017
Matthew 22:1-14
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
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I have always loved the parable of the wedding banquet, or the Great Banquet, as it is known in Luke. What I like most about it is that, because the invited guests reject the king's invitation, his servants must go out onto the highways and byways and pull in whoever they can find. Here in Matthew it's anyone and everyone they come across, while in Luke it's the poor, the blind, and the lame. I like to imagine these people on the margins of society, suddenly finding themselves summoned to a fantastic feast, making their way to the banquet hall as they are walking, and leaping, and praising God. It's another of the "great reversals" that we find throughout the gospel, where the last come first, the meek inherit the earth, and the rich are sent away empty. But there's a lot more to this parable than that.

The image of a wedding banquet resonates with me right now because our daughter Margaret recently became engaged to her longtime boyfriend Greg. The wedding isn't until next August, but one of the first things she and Greg did was get to work on the guest list. When I read this parable, the thought popped into my mind: What if all this took place surrounding their wedding? Here's how it would go: First they list everyone they can think of. Then they prioritize the names into categories: Close family and friends who absolutely must be there; additional friends, extended family, and colleagues from work; and people that they might like to have there. Then they begin

crossing off names, starting with the last category, until they get to their target number. The result is a group of people who they know love them and support their marriage. Then they send out the invitations, and wait for the reply cards to come in.

But what if time goes by—one month, then another, then another—and they have not received even one response? More time passes—still no cards. Now the wedding isn't far off. They've already signed contracts with the venue, the food service, the florist, the photographer, the videographer, the DJ, and the church. What are they to do?

This is exactly where the king finds himself in our parable today. So his first move, as it would be for Margaret and Greg, is to contact the guests. Maybe they never got their invitations. Maybe the mule who carries the post was hijacked and the mail stolen off his back. The king sends out servants to remind people that they've been invited to a big event. Strangely, no one is interested in coming. He tries again, sending out more servants. This time not only do these people refuse, but they ridicule the invitation and torture and kill the servants. Who knows why—maybe they were insulted to even be asked, or resent being bothered at all. The king is furious and, well, he gets his revenge. But he's still left with an empty table, and the food is beginning to get cold. So the remaining servants are sent out to gather everyone they can find and bring them to the feast.

The last come first. But that is hardly the end of the story. The real eye-opener is what comes next. Jesus raises the question: Is everyone and anyone welcome to the banquet, which is a metaphor for the kingdom of God, or is there some requirement—some pre-requisite, as it were?

In fact, yes. There is. Everyone who is welcome to the feast must be wearing a wedding robe. We know this because the king confronts the one man who is not: “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” the king demands to know. The man is speechless—he’s been caught in the act of trying to sneak in. For him, it does not end well.

The issue here is not a piece of clothing. Rather, the garment signifies righteousness, as it does throughout the Bible. Isaiah writes in Chapter 61: “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.” Paul writes in Colossians 3, “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” And in Revelation 19 we hear of the marriage of the Lamb, where the Bride is given fine, bright linen to wear, clothing that represents “the righteousness of all the saints.”

Here’s a modern-day analogy to the man without the robe. Imagine arriving at that odd part of the ceremony where the pastor says, “If anyone has a reason why these two should not be married, speak now or forever hold your peace.” What if someone were to jump up and begin holding forth about why the bride and groom are wrong for each other? This happens a lot in the movies, with the purpose usually being to rescue the bride from what would have been a loveless marriage. But if someone *were* to speak up at this point in my daughter’s wedding, I might wish he’d never have been allowed in the door.

The kingdom of God is open to anyone. But Jesus is saying that only those who have a right heart and a right spirit may actually enter. This explains the mysterious final line of our parable: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Jesus’ arms are open to all, calling everyone to come to him. But those who might have *thought* they were God’s chosen ones, such as the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time who refused to listen to him, lose their privilege of chosen-ness because they are unresponsive to God’s invitation of mercy and love.

How do we put on the robe of righteousness? It is not something we can do. Rather, it happens through faith a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. Faith begins with repentance; from there, it is all God’s doing. Faith opens our hearts to Jesus’ never-ending words of love, forgiveness, and mercy. We find that we gradually leave false idols behind—money, power, control, possessions, all those things that we are tempted to put in front of God as the focus of our lives.

What is true discipleship like, freed of these distracting attachments? Picture yourself now as one of the thousands of California homeowners whose entire store of possessions was reduced to piles of ash this past week in a matter of minutes. What remains? For those of faith, only Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Only our Good Shepherd, who even in the valley of the shadow of death prepares a table for us. Only Jesus, through whom God’s love is poured into us and overflows out into the world. Only Jesus, who knows us in all our struggles and sorrows. Jesus Christ, the object and source of faith. Jesus Christ, our light—and our life. AMEN.