

Dressing Up

Matthew 22:1-14

October 12, 2008

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to 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 the murderers, and burned the city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not ready. 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 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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I have a confession. I feel like we know each other well enough now for me to offer it. My confession is that I have a history of being exclusive.

There are plenty of examples, but this one is perhaps the most egregious. Seven years ago, after the giddiness of getting engaged subsided and Lindsey and I started planning our wedding, it happened. I don't know if you have figured this out yet, but Lindsey and I have lots of connections to church people. As such, when we sat down to decide who to invite to the wedding, the list was more than a little bit ambitious. Don't get me wrong, Lindsey's dad David is a great guy—generous and supportive—but with a list approaching 500 guests somebody had to draw the line.

Our plan – which exposes my history of being exclusive – was to create two lists: The “A” list and the “B” list. The “A” list invitations went out first to those who were privileged enough to make the cut. If any on the “A” list replied no, a “B-lister” was promoted and their invitation was sent.

I'm not proud of it – but it is a part of my past. I have a history of being exclusive. Even so, I can't claim our scheme as an original idea.

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You may have missed it – but in the parable we heard from Matthew's gospel this morning talked about two different lists of people.

This is not an easy parable for the church to hear. Not only because of the last few verses – that leaves us wondering why the King in this story is so harsh to his guests – but also because when we read it carefully we discover that our invitation to the party was an afterthought.

Jesus tells this parable about the wedding banquet as an allegory of salvation history for the people of God.¹ Those who were initially invited to the party were the people of Israel – invited by the Hebrew prophets. Those who are eventually invited are the gentiles – the riff-raff off the street; invited by Christian missionaries. That's right my

¹ Boring, Eugene, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Matthew* (Abingdon/Nashville, 1995) p. 417.

friends, what that means is that without a doubt we are the “B-listers” – a group that, by the grace of God, have been extended an invitation to the covenant party of the kingdom.

There are a number of remarkable things about this parable that Jesus tells in Matthew. The first is to notice how the kingdom of God is described; not as an austere gathering of the holy – but as a bona fide party. We talk a lot about eternal life or heaven or God’s vision of what is to come. Sometimes I think we underestimate the joy that is associated with what God has in store. Here, the vision of God’s kingdom is clear: it is like a party; a banquet – and no expense has been spared. Remarkable!

Something else to notice about this parable is the persistence of the king – the host of the party. Three times he sends out his servants to bring in guests that will fill up the halls. Three times! Think about that for a minute. Think about the pride-swallowing effort inviting, re-inviting, and re-inviting again would take. Certainly it says something about the king’s commitment to wanting his house to be filled for the party.

But, finally, notice what is perhaps the most remarkable part of this parable: notice who the king ends up inviting. It’s not just the “B-List.” It is everybody. “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.” Both good and bad! What started out as an exclusive gathering has, by the end of the parable, turned into party bursting at the seams with an indiscriminate collection of people plucked off the street. And that, my friends, is the kingdom of God.

You kind of wish the parable ended there. The radical inclusive nature of God is a nice point to the story – but alas the parable continues.

The king decides to come take a stroll through the crowd – and what he sees is a one of these guests bellying up to the bar without the proper attire. It’s one thing to show up off the street – it’s another take for granted the privilege of being invited to the party. The king’s response is not pretty. Regardless of how you interpret “being

banished to outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” – it is not a place you want to visit, and it clearly communicates the king’s feelings of be disrespected.

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So what does this mean? What is the significance of the wedding robe, and why is the king in this parable so harsh?

Certainly this is not Jesus’ way of admonishing men to wear suits and women to wear dresses while in church. Yes – even men who come to church in polo shirts and – Lord forbid it – women who wear pants will be welcome in the kingdom of God.

But clothes do matter. The point of entrance in the earliest Christian Church (which is still our point of entry) was the baptismal font. It used to be that when you joined the church and were baptized, you were given a new set of clothes—typically a white gown—that signified that you had died to your old life and were reborn into a new one: a new life in Christ.

That is the significance of baptism. It is cycle of death and rebirth. When we pass through the waters – whether we are dunked or sprinkled – we come out wearing a different set of clothes. Our new clothes mean new life. Our baptism into the Church means that we are distinctly different, in every way: how we live, what we value, who we love, how we love.

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My sister tells a story of a teenage girl from her youth group in Richmond. Her name was Carrie – and she was, to be generous, a little spoiled.

Carrie was an only child – and her mother worked in retail. Therefore, Carrie was always—always—dressed to the nines. She wore the right labels, she accessorized exceptionally well, her belt matched the bows in her hair and the shoes on her feet – I think you get the picture.

One summer, the youth group of that church went to the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico on an international mission trip. They were allowed to bring one suitcase – which proved to be a difficult proposition for Carrie. Carrie's suitcase was filled with Banana Republic tops and Lucky Brand jeans, stylish shoes, and insy-weenie swimsuits.

Arriving at their worksite, the group from North America realized that their living conditions would be a little different than the suburbs of home. They would be sleeping in hammocks – and their rooms were shared with both scorpions and each other. The work the group came to do was putting on a roof of the local Presbyterian church. The group tackled that work in the morning – and in the afternoon, after their siesta, there was a time to play with the children of the church.

Carrie gave the young girls stickers to put all over their dusty dresses and little bows to put in their hair, “Que bonita!” she would say to them. How pretty! The girls would smile and laugh.

As the week went on, the work on the roof intensified. After the steel I beams were put into place, and after the cinderblocks were lined up, it was time for the concrete to be poured. The group started what was known as “a bucket brigade.” The adults and strong group members lifted the full buckets of concrete up to the roof where the concrete was spread over the cinderblocks. The smaller and less strong members of the group had an equally important task of catching empty buckets that were thrown off the roof to return them to the concrete pourers for refilling. Carrie was on bucket catching duty. There she was in her Nike shoes, Lucky Brand jeans, and Banana Republic t-shirt – catching buckets once filled with concrete. By the end of the morning, Carrie was covered head to toe in splatters of concrete and dust – she was clothed in it. Clothed in the labor of building a church. Clothed in the care and connection to a community in Mexico.

The little girls came by to watch and when they saw Carrie, all clothed in concrete, they smiled and said, “Que bonita!” How pretty!²

² With thanks to the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin and her Portable Snack (2008) paper on this text. Not only for this story – but for the hermeneutical trajectory that shaped this sermon.

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If I understand what Jesus is trying to communicate in this parable, it is this: The Christian life means more than just showing up at the party. Showing up is easy – especially when all are invited. But it isn't enough to just show up; the Christian life is about being dressed and ready to go.³

How many of you – when getting ready to go a party – have found yourselves standing in your closet, looking around at the myriad of options of clothes for you to wear?

Well, in the words of a theologian I know, “it seems to me that this text asks [us] that when we are standing in the closet wondering what to wear, we should pull off the hanger the garment of our baptism, our Christian life. We are to put on the clothes of compassion and justice, the clothes of love and peace. We are to get dressed in forgiveness and humility. Then, and only then, will we be ready for the party that we are graciously invited to by the grace of God.”

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ With gratitude to the Rev. Michael Kirby – whose sermon on this text is titled “Dressed and Ready.”