

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment: and he saith unto him, Friend how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment? And he was speechless.”

Today’s Gospel passage often strikes people as downright unfair. The king sends his servants out to bring in anybody they can find so all that catered food doesn’t go to waste; and then when he notices some poor schmo who couldn’t afford to stop at Macy’s as he’s being roped into the banquet and pick up brand new suit, the king tosses him back out. Didn’t he say, “I don’t care what kind of folks they are, bring them in”? Isn’t that pretty much what he asked for, a bunch of street people who didn’t have anything better to do? Well, there is a cultural problem when we read this passage, which would be cleared up if we were in the habit of frequenting first century Palestinian weddings. But since I doubt many of us are, I’ll try to explain. You see, the wedding garment is not something that the guests were expected to provide themselves. It’s not some fancy silk and cloth-of-gold dress or gown that everyone was assumed to have hanging in their closets to put on at a moment’s notice. Rather, what is translated the wedding-garment was a simple piece of clothing furnished at the door by the host for his guests; they weren’t expected to arrive with it. It was probably some sort of badge or maybe a sash that the guests would wear to symbolize their joy on behalf of and their unity with the newlywed couple and their family. So when the king questions him about it, the guest is not speechless because he can’t believe that his host would be so demanding as to expect him to show up in something he couldn’t afford; rather, he is speechless because he has been busted. The Greek word for “speechless” might also be translated “silenced”, so we

can imagine him just blabbing away, trying to be a big shot amongst the other guests, until he turns around to grab another glass of champagne, and there's the king. He sort of looks down and tries to see if there's any way he can slink away, but his time is up. He realizes what he's in for, because it is an insult to his host not to don the garment that he's been given, through no expense of his own, at a feast he didn't have to pay for, for a couple he doesn't even know. He is the original wedding crasher. Or even worse (since technically he was invited), it would be like a guest spitting on the bride, if you can imagine that. The king is saying, "Look at all this I've done for you—you were out on the street—and I invite you into this sumptuous banquet, and then you can't even show the most nominal bit of gratitude or respect by wearing this same, simple little sash everybody else is wearing that I gave you. They didn't have any problem putting it on; what's wrong with you? Do you think you're special?" It certainly cuts against our pride of individualism—no one's going to tell me what to do. That guest who refused to put on the wedding garment pretty much sealed his own fate—he knew he'd be tossed out if he encountered the host.

For the real crux of this parable is in what the wedding-garment symbolizes. And what it is is simply our response to God's grace. God provides all this glorious feast, his boundless, overflowing grace; we don't earn it, and neither do we deserve it (otherwise, it wouldn't be grace, which is unmerited favor). But he still gives it to us. We only have to respond in faith, and a faith that loves him rather than the grace. This is the answer to the question of why God doesn't always shower us 24/7/365 with perceivable grace upon grace. People say, "Well, I love God—why isn't he getting me that promotion or healing

my mother's cancer or giving us beautiful, sunshiny weather?" Well, if God's way of showing that he loves us was constantly raining down earthly gifts and honors, how would we know whether it is God we love, or those gifts? But I digress; that's really not my main point, though it would make a perfectly worthy sermon itself. Rather, my main point is that whether we perceive it or not, God is always pouring grace into us.

Existence itself is a grace from God that we don't deserve. The greatest instance of God's grace, his getting up on the Cross and dying so that we may live, is something we didn't deserve for him to do; he did it because he loves us. And even faith, St. Paul says, is a gift; so our response to God's grace is only possible through his grace. But he gives us that opportunity to give that little bit back to him, to participate in our sanctification, to use the free will he has endued us with, to give back to him what he has given to us to begin with. It's like tithing; God gives us one hundred percent of what we have to begin with, he's the one who given us our existence and our ability to earn that living, and we wouldn't have anything if it weren't for him, let alone a measly ten percent. But he deigns to allow us to participate with him, not just financially but in all areas of our sanctification, working out our own salvation in fear and trembling, putting it into practice in our own lives, not apart from God, but in him. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

There is a comic strip called *Zits* (not a very appealing name, but an appealing and quite insightful strip). It's all about the ordeals a modern teenager named Jeremy has to endure from hopelessly nerdy parents who seem to take every possible chance to embarrass and oppress their son. Well, there's this one from years back that I clipped out and hung on

my comic strip hall of fame. In the first panel, Jeremy is sitting down and his mom says, “Here’s your breakfast, Jeremy—scrambled eggs, toast, fresh-squeezed orange juice and a vitamin.” Then as he’s munching down, she adds, “I slipped a ten-dollar bill into your wallet for lunch and any school supplies that you might need.” In the third panel she continues, “When you get home, I’ll have a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies for you. Oh, would you mail this check for your guitar lessons on your way?” Then in the final panel you see Jeremy hunched over sullenly, walking to school, holding the envelope like it’s made out of lead, and he is thinking to himself, “Why do *I* have to do everything around here?” You see, that’s just exactly like us: God does all this stuff for us, he even puts the money in the account and writes the check so that we can have the guitar lesson, and he asks us to cooperate in some simple way. Take that envelope—I’ve even put the stamp on it for you—and on your way to school (you don’t even have to make a special trip), just drop it in the mailbox. But we think, “Ugghh, that’s just more than anyone can possibly bear—God’s making me do everything.” No, God is doing everything—he’s just asking you to work with him, to work with him through his grace. Our will, which he has given us, is really the only thing we can give back to him. When we give any of our time or our treasure or our talent or whatever to him, we are not giving him any of those things as if he needs any of them. He doesn’t need anything, since he is God. What we are really offering to him is our will; we are doing this for him because we love him, and we choose to do it freely. And why he asks us to do that is not for his benefit, but for our own. He asks us to love him because he loves us, and wants the best for us. He knows that nothing else will satisfy us in this world, but himself, because he, whose very nature as Trinity is to give of himself, knows that he himself is the only perfect

fulfillment. He gives us that wedding-garment, not for his own sake, but for ours, because he knows that being a self-centered, self-seeking jerk is going to land us in outer darkness anyway, because we are not going to choose anything eternal over our mortal selves. He gives us that tiny little bit to do to teach us that everything we have (even that little bit he gives us to do) is from him, and not from ourselves. Because if we had to rely on ourselves, we'd be out there on the highways, in the gutter, spiritually speaking, like that guest before he gets invited in. We'd be spiritual beggars. But God gives us an unimaginable feast in our spiritual penury, he places before us the most glorious of all banquets; all we have to do is give ourselves back to him.