

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Have you ever shown up at a somewhat formal social occasion and suddenly realized that you weren't dressed appropriately? There have been any number of occasions in my life when this has happened to me! I'm not much of a clothes horse which makes having professional attire quite convenient. When I was much younger I remember vividly showing up with my best friend at a Junior League function as guests and that sinking feeling when we both realized that we were woefully under-dressed for the occasion. She leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "Just walk through the room like you're wearing pantyhose!" Needless to say, neither one of us was ever invited again to a Junior League function, but that was small consequence compared to what happened to the ill-prepared and underdressed wedding guest we just heard about in the gospel this morning.

This particular parable also appears in the gospel of Luke, but with some dramatic differences. In Luke's version the king is angry about the original guests not showing up, but the only way he vents his anger is by simply inviting a whole new set of guests to the feast. It's a happy parable about the all-inclusive nature of the kingdom of heaven. From all we've heard from Jesus about what the kingdom of God is like, we can safely surmise that there's no dress code there.

But the same story in Matthew is dramatically different. It hits us square in the face with a king who seems to have an anger management problem. When the king is angry and disappointed because his original guests don't show up, he does more than just invite new guests. The original guests don't just meekly decline and make excuses; they kill the king's messengers sent to get them. In retaliation the king sends out troops to kill the murderers and then burns the city to the ground. Then the king sends out more messengers to round up any survivors that they can find...both the good and the bad...to invite them to come and enjoy the king's feast.

We are understandably shocked by what Jesus has to say! If this parable is an allegory which most of them have been so far, then the king is obviously a reference to God, but this is not the way we tend to think of God. This sounds more like a description of God from the Old Testament...a description that Jesus' listeners would have known very well as would those in Matthew's little church.

However, Jesus has spent a good deal of his time in the gospel of Matthew correcting and clarifying the established interpretation of God long held by the Jewish community...that God is

angry and vengeful with those who misbehave. Matthew is laced with teachings from Jesus that begin with the phrase: "You have heard it said: "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." (Matthew 5:21-22). Matthew has used a literary device in having Jesus repeat the phrase "You have heard it said ... but I tell you" throughout the fifth chapter in order to introduce to his audience to a new interpretation of what God is all about.

So what on earth is happening in this parable? And what can it possibly mean for us? Consider the context. Hold if you can, two parallel contexts in which we hear this parable. The first is the immediate context of Jesus speaking to the religious leaders. For the last several weeks, Matthew has allowed us to be witnesses to the confrontation between Jesus and the the Scribes, the Chief Priests and the Pharisees who are questioning Jesus' authority and wondering about their own. The parable we just heard this morning is the third parable that Jesus tells to counter the Temple leaders about their authority and his. Jesus is speaking to and about the privileged and how they misbehave and how badly they treat those who are in their care. The Temple leaders are becoming more and more hostile toward Jesus with each new parable. Jesus leaves no doubt that he is putting the privileged and the powerful in their place.

The second context is the audience to which Matthew is speaking, his fledgling church, through the words of Jesus. These are the remaining followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection. These are the original Christians hanging on for dear life between the ostracism from the Temple by their fellow Jews and the persecution of the Roman Empire trying to stifle this ragtag little band of Jewish rebels still following Jesus. This audience has experienced the death of their leader, teacher and messiah as well as his resurrection. They have also experienced the burning of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans some 35 years later in 70AD. They know what the acting out of wrath looks like. Those memories are powerful and are seared into their brains in much the same way that memories of 9/11 are seared into ours. But Jesus offers them the promise of the feast to come as he does many times during his ministry.

They are caught between the Old Testament interpretation of a wrathful and angry God and Jesus' corrective message to them about a loving, merciful God who wants only to love them and to be loved in return. So consider that in the telling of this parable, Matthew is using the literary device of hyperbole and exaggeration. Is Jesus really sanctioning divine violence? Perhaps he's using what his audience already believes about God's vengeance in order to make a point. The tale he tells is absurd!! The killing of the king's messengers is a bit absurd. The king sending out troops to destroy the murderers and burn the city to the ground is a bit absurd and out of proportion. All of this occurs, of course, in a short enough time that the food prepared

for the first set of guests and will be offered to the next set of guests and will still be warm and ready to eat by the time they arrive. Crazy!

The folks who show up for the banquet are scooped up ... just as they are ... good and bad alike with no time for preparation. And then there is that cruel part at the end where the inappropriately dressed guest is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Perhaps we shouldn't read such exaggeration quite so strictly. If Jesus wanted to get our attention, he certainly has. If Matthew wanted to get the attention of his listeners by telling the story in just this way, he has succeeded. The invitation to us to God's lavish banquet is a serious one and should be taken seriously. But we know a God whose arms are opened wide to welcome us, not to trick us into some kind of situation that results in fierce judgement. Jesus has told us that over and over again throughout his ministry on earth.

PAUSE

If you look on any church website today, you will see that people are encouraged to "Come as you are!" There's no dress code ... except that you should wear some clothes! And "Come as you are!" is a genuine invitation not just about how you dress, but also about who you are and where you are on your spiritual journey. There are no preconceived requirements about what you need to believe or think or feel in order to come to church ... in order to show-up. That being said, something is required of us if we do decide to show up. If we are looking to be builders with Jesus in the coming kingdom, we already know that life in the realm of God is more than just showing up. We are required to be open to the idea of a change in us ... a conversion. Showing up is just the beginning. When we show up, we are accepting God's invitation to be fed, to be embraced, to be loved....and to be changed. The last several weeks we've heard quite a lot from Jesus about the necessity for change and our willingness to submit to change.

When we show-up at the party, the appropriate party garb is an open heart ... a willingness to release grudges against others ... to release fear and anxiety ... to practice forgiveness and to accept forgiveness... and to set aside our own will. Once we've entered the party, we are expected to conform our lives to the party's code of conduct. We are expected to shed our tired old rags of envy and greed and ambition and selfishness and anger and put on the party garb of open hearts and mercy and joy and acceptance. The only credential we need for

citizenship in the kingdom is the offering up of a life that we are willing to allow God to transform.

Gospel living begins with answering the invitation and continues by our showing up with an open heart and a willingness to shed our current clothes and don new ones. It cannot remain a mere idea. We must defer to God and offer ourselves up as a living sacrifice to God ... willing to change and willing to be changed. That's the nature of spiritual growth. That's what enables us to truly relish and enjoy the feast.

Jesus has taught us all what we are required to do and to become in order to be part of the kingdom of God. He has described our party garb in great detail. He's made a beautiful garment for each of us. All he asks is that we put our kingdom clothes on. We know that we will be standing before a loving God who is more deeply committed to each one of us than we could possibly imagine. God is the host of the feast presented to us. We need only to show up and embrace the loving God who has first embraced us ... even while we are in our shabby clothes and at our worst.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.