



October 11, 2020

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Are We Prepared

Sunday, Preparing for this morning, I was delighted the Lectionary which was established before 2001, appointed The Wedding Feast for this morning, after seven months of social isolation, denied being able to congregate, for our first Congregational Worship Celebration, complete with the secondary parable that those who do not wear a face mask will be removed! HOWEVER this is not LUKE but MATTHEW's Feast. For MATTHEW the emphasis of the Parable is JUDGMENT: HOW WE PREPARE FOR THE FEAST OF HEAVEN!

Over recent months, some have interpreted that I believed this church needed to laugh and have fun. Some that my leadership style was to be irreverent. My belief is the point of a Sermon is not to reassure us with what we know, nor berate people for what they did not know, and not to address Politics. Instead to guide people from the **equilibrium of what we think we know to *disequilibrium***, from certainty to wonder questioning our doubts, **then to a new and deeper understanding**: i.e. wisdom.

Can we state the fact right out front: this is a Horrible Story! In 1513 Martin Luther named this "The Gospel I hate to preach!" We would far rather choose parables of "The Good Shepherd" or "The Seed Sower" but we cannot pick and choose what God does, which truth to believe, what happens in life or what the Bible says. We need to understand this Parable is an **Hyperbole**, an Analogy gone to outrageous exaggeration to demonstrate the absurd behavior of "some people".

Hearing words announcing invitation to a public gathering, in the back of our minds have been the anxiety: I am not going! Under what circumstances, with what precautions, having what preparations will we ever congregate for worship? Will we feel safe? Do we feel obligated? Will we ever Celebrate Life a new? Do we ever again want to worship on Sunday morning? And those are just the thoughts of Diane and I.

A "Save the Date" Announcement is sent describing The Party of the Century. Imagine having had an invite to the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton; with a barb that this is actually a Royal Summons (?) We begin to get the idea there is a problem beneath the surface, when No One Makes a Reservation (?) Another invitation goes out, describing how elaborate this is going to be, the incredible foods served, the flowers, the music. However, those receiving the invitation are uninterested and go back to their routine business as usual. **This story suddenly becomes a Nightmare**, when this king sends Servants to compel people to the celebration, but the people turn on the king's servants, abusing them, beating them, murdering them. Out of retribution, this king sends his army against his own people, their city is laid in waste, fires burning in the streets. HOWEVER, while riots and warfare were taking place in the streets, the Banquet Hall had put Saranwrap over everything to preserve the feast, and now Micro-waved everything. So this king orders his servants to go out again, inviting everyone: Good and Bad to come to the palace for the celebration. Rich and Poor, Good and Bad, everyone now did come to sit at the Lord's table.

Luke tells a far less violent version of this same story, with emphasis on people's excuses and upon GRACE. One says, "I just bought a business and need to take inventory." Another, that "I just married and need to see my wife." A third, "I just bought a House and need to take measurements" or similar lame excuses. Luke appears to be stating God gave the 10 Commandments, being a Chosen People, and the Promised Land to Israel, who bored and fell away from God; so through Jesus God has extended Grace a second time, and a Third, but now Prostitutes and Tax Collectors are just as welcome. For Luke, this is "a Parable of Radical Acceptance" where all are included. Matthew is more edgy.

So why is this tale from Matthew so tortured? Because Matthew was writing 50 years after the Resurrection and Day of Pentecost. Ten years after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. In the latter days of the Roman Empire, we know there were Persecutions; Jews and Christians crucified, stoned and thrown to the Lions in the Colosseum. But also within Judaism there was an internal family fight. After the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed, Judaism could not be practiced as it was, there was no place to congregate and no means of sacrifice. Would Judaism become a Social Religion, community centers called Synagogues with rabbis gathering the people of faith regularly to share their faith and traditions without Priests, Sacrifice and Atonement? OR would Christianity take the place of Judaism, the Sacrifice and Atonement already having been paid for our sins? Throughout the last 50 years every Church we have gone through a smaller version of this family division about what the Church would become, who is IN and who is OUT. In the days Matthew was writing this Gospel, Christianity had been kicked out of Judaism as being NOT Judaism. This Parable is Matthew's **Social History**, the burning and sacking of the City being destruction by Assyria, Babylon, then Rome, followed by Jesus' invitation for everyone to come.

But a Parable is like a multi-faceted Jewel, turning we witness the Faith Story from another perspective! It is not enough to set this parable in the Historical Context of the Evangelist in the first Century, when we might also consider this parable related to our own family questioning where in this is the Faith story? Several have named their heart-felt struggle that despite our having them Baptized and Confirmed them, our children do not attend church, do not practice their faith. SO what do we believe about those "who reject the invitation"? What do we do when people we love do not believe as we do? Too often, it seems the choice is either for us to condemn those who believe differently, or to feel like we are somehow being unfaithful by not condemning. Personally, I would rather stand with Luke believing in RADICAL INCLUSION / ACCEPTANCE, than with Matthew believing like the rash King: God will destroy them and their world, when these are our children and grandchildren. I trust that as God has for thousands of years tried and tried and tried again to extend GRACE to us, our institutions and practices may have to change but GOD will still welcome and love us all.

BUT What do we do with this **Secondary Parable, about the one without a Wedding Garment?** What does it mean to be among the Sinners and Saints, the Good and Bad of all the world, but without a Robe?

One historic teaching of the Church, was that the Wedding garment was Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Peace, Mercy, Reconciliation, Love; so to NOT have this was indifference, violence, oppression.

For hundreds of years, the church required that before receiving the Sacrament of Communion you first attend CONFESSIONAL and PENANCE. As Presbyterians this was never a part of the Last Supper. But rather than atoning before a Priest and Altar, perhaps part of our wearing a Garment is to prepare our souls? We are coming into God's House, to meet God, did we wash our hands, have we worn our mask or Wedding Garment; or have we like the first ones, dismissed the importance of being one with God and one another?

I had a good friend, the Episcopal Priest across the street, who was elected to serve as their Bishop. Knowing I had several hospital calls and a meeting in the city that day, I knew I could not attend. I had worn a suit and tie, but not brought my robe. The morning went more quickly than anticipated, and suddenly I found myself outside the Cathedral, without a Wedding Robe. The crowds were already immense, so instead of being seated with the honored guests, clergy and good friends, I followed the line to the basement where we watched a closed circuit video without sound on a television. So I wonder whether the Parable of the Wedding Garment, is a retelling of the Disciple trying to serve two Masters?

But I am left looking for Jesus in this story? As an Analogy I want to assume that the Wedding Banquet for the Son of the King, must be celebration for Jesus. But taking this to the extremes of Hyperbole causes me to wonder? Could it be that in the midst of the crowd, with the Pharisees, and Tax Collectors, Prostitutes and Chief Priests, came Jesus? People were questioning the Pink Mohawk of one guest, and the Piercings of another, but even they had each worn a Wedding Robe. Outside the palace, someone had been without a Robe who asked Jesus for his, so perhaps Jesus entered the Feast and is judged as Unwelcome?