

Proper 23, Year A

October 11, 2020

Matthew 22:1-14 *Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a 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 those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 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 there 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.”*

A king throws a wedding feast for his son, and sends out his slaves to invite certain guests to the feast. But those who are invited do not come! So, the king sends *other* slaves to those **same** guests, to issue the invitation again, and to tell them: “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 the invited guests *reject* the king’s invitation *again*: one goes to his business, the other to his farm, and the rest mistreat the king’s messengers and kill them!

But this wedding feast is a matter of *utmost* importance. Everything is ready, and the banquet hall **must** be filled. So the king sends out *more* servants, *into the streets* this time, to indiscriminately invite as many as they can find to the wedding feast. The servants invite the rich and the poor, the old and the young, those of every ethnicity, nationality, or political persuasion. They invite both the good and the bad to the banquet; and they come.

As with the parables we have heard the past two Sundays, this is a parable about the Kingdom of God. Among the very first words that Jesus spoke as he began his ministry are, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15) And that is what the king in our parable is saying: “Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready...” The Kingdom is at hand! **Enter** into the Kingdom of God!

But, as they have repeatedly done throughout Jesus' ministry, the Jewish religious leaders to whom he is speaking reject his message, and do not attend the feast; they *refuse* to enter the Kingdom of God, being satisfied with, and attached to, the kingdom of *this* world and **its** precepts and values.

And, if we are honest, my friends, do *we* not do the same? I know **I** do! Instead of living my life as if I **really** want my prayer to come true: "**Thy** kingdom come, **Thy** will be done!" I often live, instead, as if my **real** prayer were, "*My* kingdom come; *my* will be done!" Instead of living under the reign of God, ruled by an abiding consciousness of kindness, forgiveness, compassion, loving my neighbor as myself, I, like those who were **first** invited to the banquet in today's parable, turn down the invitation, make light of it, go off to my life as usual, lived under the self-centered precepts and dogmas of *my* kingdom and the kingdom of *this* world.

Now, in this parable, we *know* that the **groom** at this wedding is the King's son; but who is the bride? The bride isn't mentioned; or is she?

The Old Testament prophets used the imagery of God as a husband and the people of Israel as God's often-unfaithful bride. (Isaiah 54:1-6; Jeremiah 31:32; Ezekiel 16:8; Hosea 2) In the **New** Testament, *Christ* is the bridegroom and the *church* is the bride, as we see when Paul says to the whole church in Corinth, "I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ." (2 Corinthians 11:2, NLT2)¹ In both the Old *and* New Testaments, then, the "bride" is a **group** of people – the nation of Israel (in the Old Testament) or the Church (in the New Testament).

John Shea believes that the "bride" in today's parable is *also* a **group** of people: the group of guests at the wedding banquet! Dr. Shea writes: "It seems that the guests **are** the bride. They were not invited to *witness* a wedding; they were invited to be married to the son. They were not invited to *observe*; they were invited to **participate**. The requirement is a wedding garment, an eagerness to be united to the son. 'Marrying the son' is a symbol for the Christian adventure of spiritual development..."

"This wedding garment signals a readiness to understand and act on Jesus' teachings; [to] make [Jesus' teachings] their own. They must marry the [divine] revelation and bear children: acts of justice, compassion, and love in the world. If they do *not* do this and are reduced to silence, ... they cannot remain at the feast. This is a wedding only for those who want to be married [to the son]."² And so, the wedding garment is, in reality, a *bridal* gown.

Three chapters earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus quoted the Book of Genesis, saying, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and *the two will become one.*" (19:5) **That's** what this parable of the Wedding Banquet is about: not our *watching* Christ from afar, as *spectators* at a

wedding; but rather our becoming **one** with Christ in heart, soul, mind, word, and deed.

Regarding the guest without the wedding robe, Fr. Shea writes, “Just belonging to the Church is not enough. Hearing the call is a first step, but it is not the final condition. Each Christian is chosen as a bride for Christ, chosen to have intercourse with the revelation of God and be filled by God’s grace. That means going beyond silent attendance. Hearing the call is easy; marrying the son is difficult.”²

Hearing the call is easy; marrying the son is difficult. “Enter through the narrow gate,” Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount; “for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14) To enter through the narrow gate is to put on the wedding gown and marry the Son.

My friends, there is a tendency for us to want to claim the label of “Christian” while never marrying the son. We flaunt our wedding invitations but do not put on the bridal gown. At least, it’s true of me. But responding to the wedding invitation (which goes out to everyone, the good and the bad alike) does not require *anything* of us. Some Christians today seek to brandish their Christian identity by speaking against abortion or homosexuality, or they want to erect the 10 Commandments on the courthouse lawn. But, as Prof. Norman Wirzba stated in a video we recently watched in Adult Forum, for us to simply say that we are *against* homosexuality or abortion, or we want to erect the 10 Commandments on the courthouse lawn requires nothing of us. It doesn’t require us to make any changes in our life: in how we live or how we spend our money or our time. It doesn’t ask me to change my mindset or my consciousness or my prejudices; doesn’t require me to be more compassionate, or forgiving, or understanding; doesn’t challenge me to go and volunteer for CASA or Loaves and Fishes or Laundry Love, or to sponsor a child at El Hogar.³

Hearing the call is easy; putting on the bridal gown and marrying the Son is difficult. It requires a willingness to admit we might be wrong; a willingness to change our mind when confronted with a truth we have been blind to or have refused to accept; a willingness to change our lifestyle – becoming more conscious of how what we do or consume affects God’s earth, or affects those who live in ecologically or economically vulnerable parts of God’s world. It means catching myself when I start to feel superior, or judgmental, or self-righteous, and stepping back. It means intentionally setting aside time to clear my mind of all the jumping monkeys and slow down, be still, and open the eyes of my heart and spirit to the presence and wonder of God in every moment of my day and every person I meet (which I will make a special effort to do this week on my retreat).

Hearing the call is easy; marrying the Son is difficult. But the Good News is that the invitation goes out to all – good *and* bad, even to you and me. And, if we are willing to put it on, Christ has a bridal gown for each of us. And he has chosen it with great love.²

AMEN

¹ *See also* Romans 7:1-6, Ephesians 5:21-33, Revelation 19:7

² John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, pp. 297-301

³ https://1drv.ms/v/s!AjPxeXQPqOpOgbtUiU-Qtx_di44USg?e=OlArqK