

TWENTH-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

THE KING'S RECEPTION/ ALL ARE INVITED.....Matthew 22:1-14

*Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.
Matthew 22:9*

Jesus' story in Matthew 22:1-14 is a parable that defies easy explanation. In fact, it is what scholars call "*an allegorical parable,*" which means that things in the story actually stand for other things. It's hard enough to make sense of the plain meaning of the story; it's even more so when everything in the story stands for something else. Here's one way to think about it:

The king in the story -----God;

The son -----Jesus;

The marriage feast----- the relationship into which God calls and invites us;

The slaves----- the prophets of Israel;

Those invited----- those who first rejected Jesus;

We ask ourselves this question. After the invited guests turned down the invite; What was the king to do? "Go into the main streets," said the king, "and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." The slaves did as they were told and they brought back all whom they found, both good and bad, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests."

Undoubtedly, the first-century Christians could relate to this story because it *mirrored* their own story. It was playing out in their very midst. As the gospel message spread from its mostly Jewish beginnings and reached out into the main streets of towns and cities, welcoming Jews as well as Gentiles, the good as well as the bad, the very nature of their community, the very fabric of their church family, began to change.

This gospel story we just heard today from Matthew 22:1-14; is still playing out in our day and age. That is where "**Renew my Church,**" which is going on in the Archdiocese of Chicago comes in handy. Most everybody knows that the institutional church here in America is in trouble. Some people claim that 90% of all American churches are either on a plateau or losing members. Today, according to the Pew Research Center the fastest growing religious sub group in America is made up of people called "nones," that's N-O-N-E-S. When asked to state their religious preference, they simply reply: none.

These people once filled our pews but now have drifted away to become nones, leaving us asking whom, if anyone, will sit down at the marriage feast and eat from the messianic banquet table. Just as the king once sent his servants into the streets of the city to invite in those they met, both good and bad, so now the king sends us to do the inviting so that the wedding hall— the church — might be filled with guests.

This is a scary idea to say the least! It's one thing to invite your friends and neighbors, people who are just like you. It's something much more threatening to invite in *everyone*, the good and the bad, so that the wedding hall will be filled. It raises all sorts of troubling questions: What if they don't look like us? What if they speak with accents? What if they come from another part of town? What if they are different? On top of all that, we also have one more thing to worry about... what if we do find the courage to invite them, only to learn that the king finds their presence problematic? Are you as perplexed by the parable as I when the king starts acting like a nightclub bouncer and says to one of the guests, "How did you get in here without the proper clothes? This is a wedding banquet, after all. The least you can do is show up wearing the right kind of clothes!"

With every ounce of decency we possess, we want to protest such treatment. We want to say to the king, “You just asked us to go into the streets and invite in *everyone*, the good and the bad. How can you hold it against them if they don’t have the right kind of clothes? Doesn’t this seem to contradict the open, gracious invitation you just asked us to extend?”

Here is another place in the parable at which we need that wedding program to help us know who’s who and what’s what. Remember in an allegorical parable, everything stands for something else. This means that the guest who showed up without a wedding garment may stand for all those Christians who have found their way into the church, but have failed to clothe themselves in the garments of Christ, symbols of the new life he invites us to put on.

And what are those garments? Perhaps the members of Matthew’s church would have been familiar with the garments spelled out in Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. “Clothe yourselves with compassion,” wrote Paul, “and kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (**Colossians 3:12-14**).

Some of you may recall the time when certain restaurants had a dress code, where they expected men, for example, to wear a sport coat. If you showed up at the restaurant and were clearly underdressed, the management would not refuse to let you in. Instead, they would discreetly loan you a sport coat so that you could fit in.

There is a part of me that wishes that the king in the gospel story had used a similar discretion. Rather than chastising the guest for being underdressed, rather than tossing him out on his ear, tossing him, in fact, into outer darkness, I wish that the king had been a bit more gracious and generous. I wish that the king had said, “Sir, you can’t attend the party dressed like that. But, look, here is a spare wedding garment. I would be pleased to loan it to you.”

But no, the king in the parable gets angry, not because a single guest was underdressed. Remember, he stands for something else. Rather, the king gets angry because many who called themselves Christians were not acting the way Christians are supposed to act. They failed to clothe themselves in those Christ-like garments of compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, and above all else — love. As a result, the king’s wrath burned hot against them and he threw them out because they failed to live up to their end of the bargain.

It’s true that all are invited, the good as well as the bad, but it’s also true that there is a certain code of conduct for those who accept the invitation and want to call themselves “Christian.” As Jesus stated earlier in Matthew’s gospel, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven*” (*Matthew 7:21*). In other words, you can’t just talk the talk. You also have to walk the walk.

In light of all of this, here’s what I am going to do. Tonight before I go to bed, I’m going to write out a list of the Christlike garments that Paul mentions in Colossians — compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, and above all else love. I’ll put it in a visible place in my closet. Then tomorrow morning when I open the closet door and say to myself, “What shall I wear today?” I will come face-to-face with this little list and then try, if only for that day, to wear one or more of these virtues, I mean really let it show. I’ll try to do the same the next day and the day after that. By doing so, other people might even notice that I am really trying to wear the garments of faith, really trying to live the life Christ calls me to live. And who knows, but the king might even find a seat for me and ask me to stay at that wedding feast in the messianic banquet hall. **Amen.**