

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

While reading the gospel lesson for today this week I was reminded of a somewhat uncomfortable incident my family has some years ago while in Quebec City.

On family trip - 7 plus father in law - nice restaurant – dress code – offer of suit coat to father-in-law- “not in a month of Sundays will I do that” – left in a huff to walk a mile back to motel – hoped he would pay the bill

On a scale between churches where people dress up and churches where people dress down, our congregation I think is what you could call a casual dress community.

We see Bronco jerseys on games days, shorts in the summer, and bright colored running shoes on acolytes, and occasional coats and ties not offered by our greeters!

We dress comfortably here. Maybe that is why some of us are reacting strongly to this morning’s story about the underdressed guest.

The story is messy! It is the last of three parable stories of Matthew’s against Israel’s leaders in the context of Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem.

It is in two parts: one, the story of the marriage feast, and then the allegorical add-on story of the uninvited and unwelcome guest.

Awful judgments are made and severe actions are taken.

There are three differing versions of the story; one in Luke the other in the gospel of Thomas and now here in Matthew, who has modified the story to serve as an allegory.

And there is a Rabbinical variant as well.

But that bit of information does not soften our reaction. Hearing the story you might wish that you could say to the reader,

“Stop! Hold on! Wait a minute! This does not sound right! What is going on here?”

What did the king expect?! If you are going to go out into the streets and recruit guests at the last minute, how can you expect them to be wearing the correct clothing?

Either give them time to go home and change or lower your standards.

No one walks around in wedding robes, just in case they happen to be invited to a royal banquet!

Some scholars say that wedding hosts provided garments for their guest in the ancient Middle East, the way the Quebec restaurant manager wanted to provide appropriate apparel for my father-in-law.

So, if that was the case, why did the person refuse the robe that was offered to him?  
Could he have thought that he would not be noticed at such an auspicious feast?

This is not ordinary story, but an elaborate allegory, signaled right from the opening line.  
*“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”*

I will give you one guess who the king and the son refer to!

Our second clue is the outrageousness of the plot.

How many people do you know who murder the postal worker for delivering a wedding invitation?

And how likely is it that a wedding banquet would stay warm while a king mobilized his troops, declared war, and burned a whole city to the ground?

By the time all of that had happened, the standing rib roast would be seriously overdone.

We cannot handle this story without knowing the story behind it, which was Jesus’ disappointment and Matthew’s after him, that so few of God’s people were responding to the invitation to celebrate with God’s son.

The prophets had invited them, but some of them had killed the prophets.  
Then, in 70 C.E. Jerusalem was sacked by Rome with the Temple demolished right down to its retaining walls, which some interpreted as fire from heaven. (Here we can recall the king burning down the city of those who murdered his courier servants.)

Then, to top it all, largely through the efforts of Paul the Apostle, the Jewish community of Christ's followers was opened to Gentiles (the second shift of invited guests) and new controversy set in.

These new folks were latecomers with no history with the God of Israel. Maybe they appeared to assume that their newfound grace permitted them to act any way they wanted to.

At the same time, the old-timers, the Hebrews were trying to figure out what it meant to live free from the Law.

What developed was a discipline problem, as new believers bellied up to God's table with little sense of what it meant to be there.

Jesus had squared everything so you could show up at the table however you wanted.

It was a "come as you are" heavenly banquet, as it were.

All were welcome and nothing was required.

No fancy clothes, no etiquette, no RSVP.

"Not on your life! Wrong," Matthew is saying to his congregation.

As an invited guest you do not get to thoughtlessly do as you please. Not so. Even a last minute invitation does not mean that anything goes, nor permit showing up without forethought.

People of God! Rise to the occasion. You have been invited to feast with the king!

So, the underdressed wedding guest gets bounced because he would not do that.

For whatever reason or faulty logic, he did not rise to the occasion.

Rather, by refusing to change he demeaned it.

Like any good allegory, this one is pointing to a reality outside of the story.

This is not about merely changing one's clothes into something made of linen with gold embroidery.

It is about a changed life, a whole new way of living.

A lived life that understands that one has been invited into the presence of the sovereign,  
the privilege of being called into the presence, even if the invitation arrives at the last  
minute.

The mistake was not showing up in shorts, but being short on righteousness, thinking no  
one would notice, least of all the king.

So, an old story, an ancient allegory, pointed at a very specific situation in the early  
church and that no longer has anything to do with us.

Really? Actually?

I imagine you have begun to wonder about that, as I did.

We could say that it happens every Sunday here and in other places, could we not?

This may not be the heavenly wedding banquet, but we could consider it to be the  
rehearsal dinner where we are getting a chance to practice our parts for that great feast.

Figuratively if not literally, all of Denver has been invited to be here with us today, but as  
we can tell, not all have accepted the invitation, having had other things to do.

Like washing the week's dust off the car, enjoying the golf course, getting a peak at the  
Aspens in the mountains, or staying in bed with the NYT.

And not because we who are here are any better than all those others who are not here.

When the king's slaves went out to extend the second invitation you will remember "they  
gathered all whom they found, both good and bad."

For whatever reason, good or bad, we have decided to accept the invitation to be here this  
morning.

Truth be told, I suspect that some of us, some of the time, myself included, have rolled in  
here without thinking much about it.

Sort of like showing up with our spiritual shirttails hanging out.

Maybe lining up at the buffet table as if no one could see the ways in which we too have  
refused to change.

Refusing to surrender our fears and resentments, refusing to share our wealth, refusing to respect the dignity of every human being.

Is this not so for each of us, some of the time?

It is like keeping on the old clothes for the sovereign's festive meal, the clothes we apparently prefer to the wedding robe of new life. And that is painful for any of us to admit.

We all proceed through our living with spiritual clothes that more or less match, and more or less do not match.

Maybe the underdressed guest thought the king was just looking for warm bodies and was happy to oblige, happy to eat the king's food and enjoy his music, if that would help the king out!

Come to think about it, that is exactly what he was doing, standing there at the table in his striped shirt and plaid pants, popping one appetizer after another in his mouth, when the king walked right up to him.

“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”

Commentator Fred Craddock notes, “Matthew knew how easily grace can melt into permissiveness” and perhaps was “addressing a church that had lost the distinction between accepting all persons, and condoning all behavior.”

When you look at them, each of the lessons this morning touch on “grace melting into permissiveness.”

The grace of rescue from Egypt is compromised by a golden calf.

The psalmist describes God's persistent longing for intimacy with God's people even in the face of their exchanging glory for the image of a grass-feeding ox, forgetting the great deed at the Sea of Reeds.

In the letter to the Philippians St. Paul urges the church to set aside the conflict that was plaguing them and live in the surpassing peace of God that has been given to them, to furnish their minds with what is true and honorable and worthy of praise.

The honest and enduring truth of the Bible is that we find new life in the midst of this wild relationship we have with God, of stumbling and falling, and by grace getting up again.

The garment of discipleship does not always fit for us and sometimes we do not want to wear it at all, if we are honest about it.

The life of faith can be a rocky path as we face up to the blunt reality of our complicated lives.

But God is not looking just for warm bodies to take up a place at the table.

God is looking for guests who know they are coming to a table of both abundance and expectation.

God is looking for honest wedding guests who will again and again rise to the occasion of honoring the son by accepting the invitation to the table, by discovering over and over that there are expectations of faithfulness that come with God's graceful invitation.

I believe that God wants us as guests who are wearing, with honesty, the whole fabric of our lives as we come; using the patterns God has given us - patterns of humility and repentance, justice and forgiveness, loving-kindness and peace.

And when we by grace put on those garments and come to the table, being truthful about whom we are and are not, we are gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous.

Honestly, why would we want to be caught wearing anything else?

Certainly not at the Table of grace set for us this morning!

