

Party Clothes

A sermon for Proper 23a - October 11, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Matt. 22:1-14 - Julian Gordy

Although, growing up as I did in West Georgia among stern southern Protestants, I was never told this, I have come over the years to see that **partying** is an important theme in scripture. Think about it: Over and over in the Bible, we are told to rejoice, to dance, to come to the banquet, to have a good time.

In fact, and maybe I shouldn't mention this during our annual Stewardship campaign, the first mention of the tithe in Deuteronomy 14 is a requirement that once a year people blow a tenth of everything they have on a party. "Buy wine and strong drink and whatever you desire," it says. I never heard that growing up either, even though we went to church every Sunday, usually twice. The only requirement was that you invite immigrants and the poor and the clergy to your party too.

In fact, in scripture God's desire for creation is often described as a great banquet, an table spread, even in the valley of the shadow of death, with the finest food and with cups overflowing with vintage wine.

In today's first lesson, Isaiah tells us that God will eventually throw a grand party to celebrate the death of Death. I want an invitation to that party, don't you?

As an antidote to the humorless purveyors of joyless religion the world has had quite enough of, I like all those party metaphors in the Bible... except for this one that is today's gospel reading.

In fact, this is one of those texts I wish had been left out of scripture because it just won't let me interpret it according to my theological predispositions. Pr. Mary Anderson of Columbia, SC, says, "If you wrestle with this. . .parable through the night, it'll leave you limping by morning." Still, this is the text that has chosen us this morning.

The parable starts out okay, good, in fact. At first it fits right in with my own theological emphases and maybe yours too. The smug, religious folk get excluded from the wedding banquet because, when the Bridegroom they say they've been waiting for shows up, they have no time for him. So, the hoi polloi of the faith community are out, and God invites to the banquet all those on the margins.

(Of course, when I come to think of it, as a well-fed and housed, comfortable, American, white, male pastor of a mainline church, I'm not sure why I find this exclusion of the religious elite all that positive.)

Anyway when I read about all those from the highways and byways, from city streets and the roads outside town, all those looked-down-on and left out, getting an invitation to the great wedding feast, I want to stand up and sing, "All are welcome in the place!"

That's who we are isn't it? We ELCA Lutherans. A big tent. Grace people. A welcome Place. We Lutherans believe that the good and bad among us are all equally dependent on the grace and mercy of God who invites everybody to the party. "It's all grace," we like to say. I've said that a thousand times as a counterpoint to the shrill condemnations of all those televangelists and fundamentalist preachers out there beating people over the head with their limp-backed Bibles.

Yes, siree, up to this point, this is a great parable. And in Luke's version of the same parable, the story stops right there, with all the ruff and anyone who will come happily raising a glass at the king's banquet table.

It is a vision that warms my inclusive Lutheran heart! The Kingdom of God is a great party to whom all are invited, without distinction. Here it comes again, "All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place!"

But darn him! Matthew plunges on. He won't stop at the door with a long line of smiling people pouring into the banquet hall they never thought they'd get to see the inside of. Matthew insists we notice this one unfortunate guy standing at the buffet table in his street clothes. He was pulled off the street and invited to the party but has not bothered to dress for the occasion.

And for not obeying the dress code, there he goes, tied hand and foot, thrown out the door into the darkness.

Every time I think I have this faith we hold figured out, every time I think I have my Lutheran theology nailed down tight, someone like this guy shows up.

I'm not alone. Luther didn't like this parable either. It didn't fit neatly into his theology. John Calvin thought it was okay, but that was because he theologized it away: The missing wedding garment, he said, was Christ. This guy was not clothed in Christ, and therefore was relying on his own merit!

Well, maybe, John, but that's a little too pat. Way too pat, actually. You mustn't impose Pauline theology on a Matthean parable just to make it fit your systematic theology even if you are John Calvin.

In fact, all sorts of homiletical and exegetical fancy-footwork has been put in play in dealing with this one poorly dressed, out-of-place, unwelcome guest.

Some have suggested that his fate means that if we don't walk what we talk we're toast, that grace gets us in the door, but then it's up to us! It's hard for a Lutheran to go there. Like I said, Luther didn't like it.

My friend and fellow pastor Frank Honeycutt, wrote a book some years ago he called *Sanctified Living*, in which he makes the case that we Lutherans can and should talk about, not just our invitation to the party, but what we do and how we act after we get there.

Christian faith, after all is very much about discipleship, about following Jesus. But somehow the practice of following Jesus has been replaced by getting your eternal life ticket punched and waiting for the sweet bye and bye while you go on living by whatever self-centered standard the rest of the world thinks is okay.

Homiletician Thomas Long warns that "to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not conform one's life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar."¹

So, what are we grace-filled Lutherans to make of this poor, cast out guy?

I was helped in my understanding of him when someone called my attention to a movie that came out about 15 years ago. It was called "Wedding Crashers"? It's about two cynical divorce arbitrators who spend their summers crashing big weddings for the good food, good drink and seducible women they find there.

They mingle with the wealthy, get in the wedding photos, drink the champagne, join full out in the festivities. But they are there for the food and drink and women, not to celebrate the bride and the groom and the future they have set themselves on.

These wedding crashers have great fun until one of them, John, falls in love.

¹Thomas Long. Matthew (*Westminster Bible Companion*), p. 248.

Then, it's no longer possible to behave like a wedding crasher. Love changes John, changes his attitude, changes his behavior, melts his cynicism.

And that's the problem with the poor schmuck in the parable. Maybe that's what his lack of wedding attire says, that he's just there for the food and couldn't care less about the bridegroom. He hasn't even bothered to change. He's there for the party, for the fatted calf and the well-aged wine. But he's been invited to celebrate the bridegroom and the bride and their future.

Could it be that the host whose party we are invited to today is interested, not just in our showing up, but in our rejoicing together, in our coming to love the one in whose honor the party is given?

In which case, there may be a **lot** of underdressed folk around. People whose religion is all about getting in, and not much about celebrating with the Bridegroom, all about going to heaven and not much about following Jesus.

Have you seen any signs of that around? Any grim-faced folk standing around eating the food and missing the point? Any folk acknowledging the grace and goodness of God, but not willing to change what needs changing?

My seminary professor Michael Root is helpful here. He said, "For the Christian, good works *are* necessary. They just don't save you." Jesus has done that.

So what do we say about this hard parable of Jesus? Pastor Mary Anderson reminds us that "parables work best when we stop working so hard to interpret them and instead allow them to interpret us."²

So, I'm going to stop here, put my theological predilections aside and sit a while longer with this tough little parable, chew on it for a while longer and see what this text that has chosen us this morning may be calling us to do in response to the grace and mercy that has been shown to us by the One who has invited us all to the party. Amen.

²Mary Anderson in *Christian Century*, October 4, 2011.