

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 11, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection *Matthew 22: 1-14: The Parable of the Wedding Feast*

So, I need to reflect on my fifth-choice gospel passage. That's what you get when you don't hit *Reply* within a nanosecond after the "Will you please write a reflection?" email comes in.

OK, a wedding feast – that most joyous of celebrations -- for the son. Got that connection. The first tier of guests is too busy, walks away, refuses repeated requests. This would be Matthew, writing for Jewish Christians, alluding to the fact that many of those first Chosen refused the offer of the Kingdom. Those who mistreat and kill the messengers are destroyed by the king. This king is harshly retaliatory in the name of justice.

Then a second tier of guests, both good and bad, invited because they happened to be out there when the invitation was issued. Nothing they deserved. Much more inclusive. I like the king better in this round.

Until he has a guy tied up and thrown out "into the darkness outside" because he is not dressed appropriately.

Wait a minute. The inclusive God refuses to let the guy stay over a stupid dress-code violation? This sounds like something out of a recent event in an upper-class Baltimore restaurant. The lack of a formal outfit deserves a punishment including "wailing and grinding of teeth"? What if the guy couldn't afford the "proper" attire? What if he had assumed he'd be accepted just the way he was? Meanwhile, the bad people who dressed up were welcomed? Because they dressed up?

Please excuse the rant. But I am outraged at this portrayal of God.

I realize that this is a parable. Heavy with unexplained symbolism. Obviously, I need to probe again.

With an embarrassed blush, I recognize my pre-retirement self among the first guests: chosen, beloved, doing good work -- but too often just too busy with work to make time for the Celebration. Apparently, Matthew's nudge is not intended only for the original Chosen People.

Meanwhile, God continues to search for, to invite, to welcome, to love people, “bad and good alike,” in an ever-widening circle of inclusion.

And the wedding garment?

It has been traditional for wedding guests to dress in their best in recognition of and respect for the joyful significance of the invitation.

And what is our “best”?

Unbidden phrases from Paul about putting on clothing spin in my brain. No, not the ready-for-righteous-battle “put on the armor of God” line from Ephesians. Something softer, gentler, but at least as challenging. Amazingly, the lines I seek are from – here’s irony – the second reading Al and I chose for our own wedding celebration:

“You are God’s chosen race, [God’s] saints; [God] loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts because it was for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful.”

(Col. 3:12-15, Jerusalem Bible translation)

If these are indeed our wedding garments, they are needed now more than ever in these days when celebrations are more likely to spread virus along with the joy, and when the Celebration of the Kingdom so often feels improbable, out of reach. And when I remember that the Kingdom is among us now, simultaneously “already and not yet,” then these wedding garments take on added significance. These are not merely party clothes. We must also wear them every day. They are our wear-to-work clothes for the *building* of the kingdom we are called to celebrate.

While God continues to invite people -- so freely -- to the Feast of the Kingdom, God is also hoping for more from us than that we show up, drink the wine, and nosh on the hors d’oeuvres. God is calling us in that second and third and forty-ninth round of invitees to recognize the life-changing gift of the invitation and the urgency of the call – and to “dress” accordingly.

Marianne Reichelt