

The Bride of Christ

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 9th, 2011
Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces... .”

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.”

I really like the way this parable *begins*. I’m not so sure I like the way it *ends*.

So it begins: There was this king, and presumably his wife, who were planning a big wedding bash for their son and his bride. Of course, there have to be lots of guests for this wedding, so they send their couriers to call those who had been summoned to the wedding reception. That’s why I like the way this parable begins.

And the man doesn’t really need anyone to bounce him, to “bind him hand and foot,” because he’s already excluded himself, already “voted himself off the island”

Most of us like weddings.

But maybe all Jesus is trying to tell us is that to distance one’s self from the wedding celebration; to dishonor our Host with an absent heart; to exclude one’s self from other guests; well, all can potentially have some very dark, devastating

And most of the time we’re honored to get a wedding invitation, so for weeks some of us can hardly wait for the party to begin, especially for that moment when the waiters begin to serve up the “oxen and fatted calves.” My mouth is already beginning to water. But before this happens, something in the parable goes quickly awry, terribly wrong. And by the time we get to the end of the story, some guy is getting bounced out of the reception hall, apparently because he didn’t come dressed to party; evidently because his heart just wasn’t into celebrating; maybe because he simply didn’t want to be there. But the result is that he royally disrespects, even dishonors, even shames his hosts by the heart that has dressed him (or not) for the occasion.

By the way, this is not the story of Cinderella. There’s nothing here to suggest that the man could not afford wedding clothes, or even that wedding clothes in that day would be expensive. Who knows, he might have even been dressed better than anyone else in the hall. The point is, he deliberately dishonored his host by setting himself apart from everybody else at the reception. And the man doesn’t really need anyone to bounce him, to “bind him hand and foot,” because he’s already excluded himself, already “voted himself off the island,” as they say on *Survivor*, not that I’ve ever gone near it. But for a host who has already been *royally* disrespected, dishonored and shamed because nobody wanted to come to his kid’s wedding, well, it’s no surprise that this king reacts the way he does: “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.”

This sounds a bit like overkill to us. So, I’m not so sure I like the way the parable ends. And, gee, I was thinking this week, what kind of a story is this for little Rowen’s baptismal day? It’s almost enough

to frighten him, with his parents, his godparents, his grandparents, and just everybody else right “into the outer darkness.” But maybe all Jesus is trying to tell us is that to distance one’s self from the wedding celebration; to dishonor our Host with an absent heart; to exclude one’s self from other guests; well, all can potentially have some very dark, devastating and lonely consequences. Jesus seems to be saying that to be estranged from God and others is to land ourselves in the outer darkness, like Cain of old, who became “a fugitive and wanderer on earth” for shedding the blood of his brother Abel.

We can show up at this wedding with no intention of honoring the One who invited us, no intention of singing and dancing, eating and drinking, lighting candles and placing flowers, lifting voices and offering gifts. We can show up with no wedding clothes. We can show up with no heart for the Host. So, the LORD laments through Isaiah, “...This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me... .” And just ahead of this guy are all those invited guests who didn’t even bother to show up, who ignored the king’s wedding invitation, not just once, but twice; and the second time they even make fun of it, while some end up killing the king’s couriers.

For an ancient society based upon honor and shame, nothing could bring more honor to one’s self and one’s family than to be invited to a wedding, especially the royal wedding of the king’s own son. And nothing can bring more shame than to be left off the guest list when everybody else you know received an invitation. To get an invitation like the one in this parable would mean that you and your family were really something—really somebodies. So, circle the date. Be there at all costs. And... dress up in something that will honor your host and tell everybody that you’re ready to have the time of your life, because nobody goes to a wedding, at least not in Chicago, dressed for a Packers game.

This parable makes the outrageous claim that when the invitations went out, those who were summoned started making all kinds of excuses as to why they couldn’t attend. Jesus puts it simply, and maybe a bit sadly: “They didn’t ‘wanna come. They even made a joke of it.”

“I cannot come to the banquet, don’t bother me now. / I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow. / I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. / Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come.” But why? Why in the world would anyone refuse such an invitation, literally, a summons to the wedding table? Why would people hold this king in contempt? And what sort of king is this who is ignored, even snubbed by everybody he invited? Are his parties really so terribly boring? Is he known for being a real cheapskate? Is his approval rating that dreadfully low? Or, is the real problem with the man’s kid? With his son?

You see, this king is facing terrific shame that, especially by ancient standards, he is going to have to address in some way. He has to save face. So, he practically gets on his hands and knees begging people to get washed up, put on some good clothes, and come to the wedding table: “It’s ‘gonna be a great time, I tell you.” The king really wants to be with us, I mean, *these people* in the church, I mean, the *wedding hall* where there will be joyous singing and quiet conversation, a glass of wine and freshly baked bread, newly cut flowers and generous wedding gifts, candles lit and a fine table cloth, maybe even some dancing.

“But we, I mean, *they* ignored him.” And now, the king has had enough. And when the dust has

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finally settled from his outburst, he again sends couriers to fill the reception hall with whomever they can bring in off the streets, “both good and bad,” doesn’t matter, “wheat and weeds,” doesn’t matter, because “the rule of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind.” The king just doesn’t give up: “Many are called but few say ‘yes.’” The invitations keep going out. The couriers continue to summons with their sermons. And the wedding feast will go on... and on... and on. And the table extends from here to eternity, because this is the marriage of the Father’s Son to His bride the Church. And we are here for no other reason than by the Holy Spirit’s invitation, summons, call that we show up to experience the joy of this wedding of heaven and earth.

When we gathered at the font for pre-baptismal conversation the other evening, I remarked to

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Rowen’s parents and all the godparents about how their baptismal party, wonderfully large as it is, reminded me of a bridal party.

And when I thought about it, that’s exactly the image that Scripture often uses for baptism. When you get married, you know, it’s joint ownership (most of the time): the house, the car, the checking account. Scripture says that we even become one flesh, one body.

And what was once mine becomes hers, and hers becomes mine.

Through the covenant of Baptism, as in a marriage, we share all things together with Christ. What is Christ’s becomes ours, and what is ours becomes Christ’s. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” As in marriage, so in baptism,

we receive a new name: the name is Christ; we are literally “Christened.” And, in a world which persistently tells us that we are “nobodies,” in baptism we are told that we are “somebodies.” We are “little Christs” to others.

So, in a few minutes, we’re going to have another “little Christ” born among us. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have *clothed yourselves* with Christ,” Paul says to the Galatians. Again, in Ephesians, “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self... and to *clothe yourselves* with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, *clothe yourselves* with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” says Colossians, “... Above all, *clothe yourselves* with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” In Baptism, we “put on” the Lord Jesus, and the Lord Jesus “puts on” us—today, and again tomorrow, and again the day after tomorrow, and everyday for the rest of our lives.

Luther liked to call baptism a “joyful exchange”: “By the wedding ring of faith [Christ] shares in the sins, death and pains... which are his bride’s. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended [to the dead] that he might overcome them all. ...For his righteousness is greater than the sins of all [humanity], his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell.”

Today, Rowen Lee becomes a “little Christ,” dressed in the wedding clothes of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, prepared to walk into the eternal wedding feast with us. Dear parents, dear godparents, dear church, allow Christ to clothe Rowen every day in these robes of righteousness, that he will live in Christ, and Christ will live in him.

“... Live with him among God's faithful people, bring him to the Word of God and the Lord's Supper, teach him the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in his hands the Holy Scriptures, and nurture him in faith and prayer... .”

And one day, he will pray with us: “You prepare a table before me / in the presence of my enemies;
/ you anoint my head with oil; / my cup overflows. / Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me / all the
days of my life, / and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD / forever.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds
in Christ Jesus.”