

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Don’t Forget your Wedding Garment”

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When I was much younger, there I was with a number of friends in New York on a very hot and humid day in September. We were arriving at a restaurant where we had dinner reservations, only to discover that this restaurant required dinner jackets. This is a custom we don’t see very often in the Pacific Northwest and we were young and dumb. I remember how naively bewildered we were, scratching our heads wondering who would wear a jacket on a hot summer day? Looking inside, however, all the men were in fact wearing dinner jackets as is the custom in many places on the East Coast we found out. The restaurant would not seat us without dinner jackets and so we ended up having to find another place to eat that didn’t have that restriction. It might have been pizza, so the evening was not completely lost thanks be to God. I sincerely love pizza. We were however looking forward to something more fancy that evening. Next time, note to self, bring a dinner jacket even if it is summer!

I mention this because, in Jesus’ parable this weekend from Matthew, Jesus speaks of a person being thrown out of the wedding banquet for not coming properly dressed. The cultural expectation to follow dress codes for certain social events can be sincerely lost on those of us who grew up in this area of the world. However, in most areas of the world there are still varying degrees of cultural expectations regarding how people dress in public and at certain places. For instance, the first time I approached the Western Wall in Jerusalem, I forgot that I needed something to cover my head and so I was given a well-used and rather oily paper yamaka to put on. It was gross but I wore it anyway out of respect, making a note to myself again to buy a yamaka at my earliest convenience. If you plan to visit St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome on a hot sunny day, it doesn’t matter who you are, you better be wearing modest clothes or you will not be allowed in. It is the cultural expectation there. And even here in the Pacific Northwest, I think we have all seen a sign at one point or another that says, “No shoes, no shirt, no service”, right? And anyone who has served in the military probably knows that if you show up to an event without being dressed properly you might be spending the following week peeling potatoes.

Although we are more casual here in the Pacific Northwest, the social principle behind dress codes for certain events is not entirely lost on us. When the king in the Jesus’ parable orders a man thrown out of the wedding feast for not attending the event properly dressed, the people listening to Jesus in the first century in that area of the world understood this as common sense. The message Jesus was trying to convey by this parable however was a bit more controversial. Let’s walk through the parable more slowly so to better understand.

We have this king who clearly represents Jesus’ Father in heaven. The king’s son clearly represents Jesus’ self-understanding as the Son of God, this alone would have been very controversial to non-Christians listening to the parable but this identification was already accepted by Jesus’ disciples of the first century who would have seen the wedding banquet clearly symbolizing the incarnation; divinity has married humanity and become one flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. So far, so good. The king sends out invitations to all the leaders in the surrounding areas announcing the marriage banquet of his son and is shocked to discover that

many of these dignitaries simply ignored the invitation and some of them even abused and killed the messengers who brought the invitation.

Let's stop right there. This was not lost on the ears of those listening because this scenario at face value is absurd. If the king gave you a personal invitation to attend a banquet in those days, if you valued your life and the lives of your family, you better attend. We wouldn't look in our calendars to see if the date of the banquet conflicted with a bunko night, follow? We most certainly wouldn't punch the messenger in the nose. That the king got such a horrible response is unthinkable and therefore he sends out his soldiers to exact punishment. What is Jesus referring to with all of this?

The messengers Jesus is referring to are all the prophets God had sent Israel throughout the centuries heralding the coming of the Messiah. Israel had a long track record of ignoring the prophets, even turning to idolatry at times. Israel also had a long track record of abusing and even martyring the prophets, think Jeremiah or John the Baptist to name a couple. The burning of the city may be a reference or foreshadowing of the destruction of the temple around 70 AD, which happened ten to twenty years before Matthew's Gospel was completed in the present form that we have today. The burning of the city could also represent the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians centuries earlier. I like to think of this as what can happen to the soul when we act against God's will in our lives, not in the sense of punishment but rather in the sense of consequences given that God knows what is best for us and we should listen to him. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the imagery Jesus is employing has a certain measure of hyperbole to it meant to shake the listeners, helping them take notice of what happens next.

What happens next: the king then decides to invite the rest of the world to the banquet instead. What this refers to is: the salvation offered to Israel in the banquet of the Son has now been extended to the entire world, not just Israel. This is an important theme in the Gospel of Matthew because the Jewish Christians were the original audience for this Gospel. They are being told to welcome Gentile Christians as all are welcome to the wedding feast of the Son, as all are welcome in the Church today. This is good news reminding us to keep our doors wide open to whoever is seeking Christ in their lives. Which leads us to the poor fellow who forgot his wedding garment, what are we to make of him?

My friends, the salvation offered to the whole world at the wedding banquet of the Son requires a response from us. It requires a response. Just as we are dressed in a white garment after we have been baptized, once we are invited into the wedding feast, our faith must now look like something. Our lives must be dressed in what it looks like to be a Christian. Our lives must visibly demonstrate reverence, charity, caring for the less fortunate, trueness to our word, trueness to our baptismal promises, honesty and uprightness, following the commandments, and following the precepts of the Church. You get the picture. Once we are invited into the banquet of the Son, once we are invited into the Eucharistic feast, our lives must look like we belong there. Follow?

You see, God has graciously offered us a path to eternal salvation through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God has invited us into the heavenly banquet where he will provide for all peoples, as Isaiah prophesied. As we journey through life however, we are given an important reminder in today's Gospel as we make our way to heaven: If we call ourselves a Christian, our lives must look like it. We must be dressed in love, compassion, faith and fidelity. This means when we head out the door each morning to work, to school, to a family gathering, vacation, wherever God is inviting us to be today, the sincerest recommendation of the Gospel this weekend is: wherever God invites to be in life, don't forget your wedding garment.