

Come Dressed Up

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Thanksgiving Sunday

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 9, 2011

Text: Deuteronomy 26.1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.' You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Matthew 22.1-15

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again

he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

On a Thanksgiving Sunday, it is good to hear about a banquet. In homes and public places, there will be quite a number of sumptuous feasts today and tomorrow, to celebrate the harvest season and to give thanks for the blessings of food and family and friendships that constitute an abundant life. Many of the food banks and homeless shelters in the city have special dinners which are open to all comers, and a cherished tradition in some families is to serve at such a dinner. Tables will sag under the weight of turkey and tofu, mashed potatoes and gravy, apple crisp and pumpkin pie. We picture people from all kinds of circumstances, dressed in all kinds of outfits, brought together to be nourished in body and spirit. The noise level will rise with the spirit of warmth and good cheer that accompanies a holiday meal. Imagining such a convivial get-together, where everyone is invited and the food and drink are plentiful, is a pleasure on Thanksgiving. It seems like the perfect image of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It's almost a pity we have to read the story in detail, as it was actually written.

As portrayed in Matthew's Gospel, there are some very awkward moments at the party. Seems like more of a Monty Python skit, beginning plausibly enough with a king's invitation, but then gradually careening out of control as action tumbles over reaction. The invited guests are churlish. They blow off the king's messengers, and when they are invited for a second time, with tempting descriptions of a sumptuous banquet, they do shoot the messengers, actually kill them! Then, in retaliation, the would-be host massacres the guests and burns their city. Quite far over the top.

Back at the party palace, new guests are rounded up from the neighbourhood streets. As the aroma of roasting meat, and spicy vegetables, and rich wine leaks into the night air, absolutely everyone is included, *both the good and the bad*, as we are told. This seems to be good news.

But have grace and ease and good feeling been restored? Not really. For the King is now offended by one of the *new* guests. Why are you not dressed up? Take him away! Weeping and gnashing of teeth. It certainly doesn't seem fair, but this King expects every guest to come dressed up, even on the spur of the moment, even without warning. So, the Kingdom of Heaven seems to be a pretty tough kingdom, it's a demanding kingdom. At least, that's what Jesus says, as he teaches in the Temple at Jerusalem.

This parable is the last straw for the Pharisees. Until this point, they have been offended and disapproving, anxiously eyeing the crowds who seem to think of this upstart from Galilee as a prophet. But now, Jesus has pushed them past their dubious, critical scepticism. From here on, they are unequivocally out to get him, and all of their questions will be designed to trip him up – to expose him as a dangerous heretic. And see how quickly they work, for only three days after Jesus tells this parable, they arrest him.

We can see why they are offended. These chief priests and Pharisees are well aware that they are the invited guests Jesus is talking about. But they are serious and thoughtful followers of their faith tradition, leaders among God's chosen, beloved people. They have grown up on the same Deuteronomy passage that David read, and have faithfully brought their first fruits to the Temple, year after year. They give alms. For the most part, they obey the commandments. They are exactly the ones that God is said to favour, and has already favoured. We know people like this, we admire them.

But Jesus sets the bar far higher with his parable of a party. It is shocking that even the late arrivals are expected to be dressed up. How can this be considered good

news? Wouldn't it be more inclusive to say, come as you are? Whatever you are wearing is fine. Surely that would seem more welcoming?

But no, Jesus apparently thinks that everyone has what it takes to dress up for the party. That even the very poorest, the most marginalized, the widow, the child, the blind, and the disabled, the foreigner – everyone has the right outfit to wear to this royal banquet.

This is typical of Jesus – he never looks at a poor person and says, oh you poor thing, of course you don't have a wedding garment. Jesus never patronizes. He never says oh look how blind you are, look how oppressed you have been. No one's primary identity with Jesus is 'victim,' no one is an object of pity. Jesus always sees the wellness that is there. The potential. The seed of wholeness. He sees the 'wedding garment' that each of us has and says, put it on. There is an astringent quality to Jesus. Get dressed up, he says, you're invited to a banquet.

What is it, then, this metaphorical garment that allows us to stay at the party which is the Kingdom of Heaven? The Biblical scholars and commentators make various suggestions. Perhaps the garment is consciousness, the recognition that to be alive is a grand occasion. Maybe the wedding garment is an attitude of humility, or of truthfulness. Possibly it is an openness to the giftedness of others, possibly something as simple as the willingness to look for evidence of that wedding garment on everyone we meet.

As we approach our annual Stewardship Campaign, we approach it through this tough parable of Jesus. Our task as a church is to help one another get to the party dressed up. Not just here within the church, but more broadly.

Of course we want the church to prosper – to meet the budget, to repair the roof and finance the Sunday school and run the Community café and make significant contributions to the work for justice of our partners at home and abroad. We hope for a plentiful harvest.

But these activities are not undertaken for their own sake – each in its different way must respond to the demand Jesus makes in this parable of the Kingdom of heaven. His demand on us to put on that wedding garment and help others put it on applies to everything we do. We pray that our worship will honour God's gift of life and creation, and nourish the souls of all who join in the lovely banquet. We pray that the songs we sing and the study we undertake together will bring the insight and hope

and new energy of a wonderful party. We pray that in our hospitality and pastoral care we will bring the attentiveness and thoughtful presence that is the hallmark of banquet life. We pray that our work for justice is like the uncorking of fine wine, that our work in the city and beyond unleashes the capacity of those whose contribution to society is thwarted by poverty, racism, gender bias, and other exclusions, so that justice may flow. Let us be found saying to one another and to everyone we encounter, you seem to be wearing a wedding garment – I see that you are a guest at this banquet too.

Jesus said, *the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.* On this Thanksgiving Day, he says, this is the banquet. It is open to all comers. And let everyone come dressed up. Thanks be to God. Amen.