

“Party Manners”

Matthew 22:1-14

October 9, 2011

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: Guide us O God by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Many of the parables in Matthew’s Gospel are parables about grace—grace in terms of the way we are accepted and forgiven, a lavish grace, for example, in the way that a generous land owner chooses to reward all the workers showing no regard for how much or how little anyone has done.

And it seems like here it is again in this parable about a wedding banquet. A king invites everyone to come but gets rebuffed instead by those he invites. So the king sends his servants back out onto the highways and byways to invite everyone. Gone is any sense of hierarchy. Thrown out is the Social Register, just go out and fill up the banquet hall.

This parable is also featured in Luke’s Gospel, and my hunch is that if most preachers were given a choice between the two versions on which to preach, they’d chose Luke’s version over Matthew’s any day of the week. Because essentially Luke’s version is clearly about grace while Matthew’s version comes with a difficult twist.

Actually this parable is found in Matthew’s Gospel sandwiched between the Palm Sunday and the crucifixion accounts. Editorial placement like that doesn’t happen by accident—it’s put there for a reason. And unlike the similar parable appearing in Luke, which is clearly a parable about grace, this parable carries with it an awkward note of judgment, suggesting at the very least that the gospel is not to be taken lightly, and that it has some pretty serious consequences associated with it.

This is one of several parables of judgment spoken by Jesus against the chief priests and Pharisees, and it took place during the last week of his life. If you take the parable as an allegory, upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that the king in the story is God and that the wedding feast is the great messianic banquet at the end of time. The messengers killed represent the prophets and early Christian missionaries. And the invitation to the bad and the

good alike, represents the church's outreach to both Jews and Gentiles. This parable is hinting at a radical invitation that also carries with it some radical implications. The final guest list includes everyone, including those who have in no way earned the right to be there—not unlike those who put in only an hour of work and yet receive a full day's wage. Those who end up filling the banquet hall have not demonstrated by their appearance that they belong. In fact, the bad are included along with the good.

I think that's where the church today tends to get hung up, on the issue of whether or not we ought to exclude those who are considered bad. Like pulling up the weeds which have somehow grown up amongst the wheat, should we not do something about all the bad people around us? And not altogether unlike the church today, the Pharisees, the authorities of the religion in that ancient culture, had elaborate systems for keeping track of everyone's rights and wrongs.

Well, according to this parable, both the good and the bad are included in the final guest list implying that all those elaborate systems devised by religion in order to measure human worthiness in God's eyes have been rendered irrelevant. The desire of God is to see the banquet hall full and that means inviting and including everyone, the bad along with the good.

So far so good. But now comes the twist in this parable. After extending this sweeping and gracious offer to come to the banquet, and after sending his servants out to round up everyone they can find, the king comes across someone at the banquet who is not dressed appropriately—someone committing a real *faux pas*, like wearing brown shoes with a tuxedo. And the king addresses him.

"Friend," the king says, which as Tom Long reminds us is never a good thing—it's like calling somebody Buster. "Friend, how did you get in here wearing that?" Then the king in his anger has the man bound and not just tossed out of the party but thrown into the eternal darkness where, it says, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Well, what's that doing in this parable about grace? It seems harsh and horribly out of place and frankly, inconsistent given the gracious, sweeping invitation issued by the king in the beginning. When questioned by the king, however, about the inappropriateness of his attire, the man doesn't respond. And perhaps that's the problem here? Perhaps that's what angers the king most.

Throughout the Bible there are many references to clothing which serve as metaphors. Like clothing one's self with compassion, kindness and humility (Col.3:12) or being attired in the new self, created in God's image (Eph.4:24). I tend to agree with the scholars that the wedding garment in this parable symbolizes the Christian life. It could be seen as representing how we

are called to put on the baptismal gown of Christ. Because to wear a wedding dress or a special robe is to know the significance of the situation. At the very least it represents a commitment—an investment. And sometimes that commitment means changing your life, changing your attitudes and ideas—changing fundamentally who you are. \The Christian life is not, as it is often thought and worse yet, portrayed, an attempt to prove ourselves worthy before God in order to finagle an invitation to God’s exclusive party at the end of time. Rather, the Christian life is about responding with joy to God’s love and grace and unimaginable acceptance and inclusion of us. It is accepting the invitation and that vote of confidence by God to actually change our lives—to impact our decisions—to influence the way we not only treat our neighbors, but influence who we define as our neighbors. It is understanding that this commitment is serious business that should never be taken lightly.

I remember visiting the town of Meteora in Greece, which is home to some very dramatic rock formations jutting up out of the earth. Perched on top of some of the rock formations are ancient monasteries many of which have survived for centuries, including the Turkish occupation. The monks who built those monasteries figured their locations would provide the ultimate seclusion. In climbing up hundreds of steps to visit one of them, I was struck when entering the narthex of the church that every inch of the walls was covered with ancient paintings graphically depicting Christians being brutally tortured and violently martyred for their faith. The implication of such depictions in the narthex, outside the church itself, is that the catechumens, those who were about to take vows and become monks, before they were taken into the sanctuary, they had to first confront the serious commitment they were making. Not what the church today would consider seeker friendly!

Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, writes about the relative, all be it misguided ease with which many modern day Christians often come strolling into God’s presence, almost oblivious to what we’re doing in church. She writes,

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It’s madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return (p.40-41).

The Christian life, being invited to the party, is something that should demand our attention and be something that we take seriously. Grace is amazing, but then so is God's desire for a response from us. And I don't think that the attached saying in this parable, "For many are called but few are chosen," should be taken as a forecast of the proportion of the saved and the damned. I think its function is not to frighten Christians with the thought that the statistical odds are against them but is instead intended to convey the message of seriousness by which we should strive to live the Christian life. Or again, as Tom Long says in his excellent commentary on Matthew,

It reflects a traditional Jewish saying that basically means, "Everybody gets called but not everybody ends up worthy of it," or, in the context of this parable, "God wants everybody at the party, but not everybody wants to come or knows how to behave when they get there" (Long, *Matthew*, p.247).

This parable reminds us that being a part of the Christian community should make a recognizable difference in our lives—a difference in terms of our commitments and our decisions. And I think ultimately, that's the point of this parable. And so to the guy at the banquet who is dressed improperly, the gracious invitation hasn't made a difference in his behavior. Once inside the banquet hall, this guy is oblivious to his surroundings. For all practical purposes, he's found standing near the refreshments table drinking directly from the punch bowl, and when the king asks him, "Who let you in here...where's your respect for my gracious invitation," the guy is left standing there with red punch dripping off his chin onto his T-shirt, sporting a look on his face as if to say, "Who, me?"

What's being judged in this parable is apathy and indifference. If, for whatever reason, you find yourself this morning questioning God's love for you, or God's willingness to accept you, know that a gracious invitation has already been extended to you. Know that a place at the table has already been set for you. And know that God desires nothing more than that you accept this gracious invitation to come inside the royal banquet hall and join the party.

But God also desires that you not just show up but that you know where you are and why you're there. That you put some skin in the game. It is serious business and it can be kind of risky for those who accept the invitation. But as we've also heard this morning, not accepting the invitation, or failing to appreciate God's graciousness is far more risky.

Amen.