



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean E. Wolfe, Rector

Unexpectedly Included

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 15, 2017

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Isaiah 25:1-9, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Today's gospel lesson is one of the more difficult parables to interpret, so hang in here with me for a few moments while I try to understand it myself as I'm trying to explain it to you.

"The parable of the wedding banquet is the third in a series of parables directed towards those who reject the message of God's Messiah and question the authority of Jesus. It is told as he taught in Jerusalem during the final days of his ministry." Luke's version of the parable is the more palatable and less violent one, but Christians believe the Good News of God in Christ is complex enough to require four entirely different gospels to communicate the Good News completely—and so here we go with Matthew's version.

A king's son is to be married and a wedding feast is planned. Not a dry, staid Protestant affair, mind you, but a multi-day, ancient near-eastern wedding palooza! Slaves are sent out with invitations, as is the custom of the time, but the guests never show up. So the King sends more messengers to announce the preparations are complete and to tell the guests that the party is on! Still the invited guests refuse to come, and some even make light of the invitation. They disrespect the king by continuing to tend to their farms and their businesses. Others even go so far as to kill some of the king's messengers!

The king predictably responds in anger and sends an army to kill the murderers (and to destroy their entire city). In the absence of his original guests, the king commands his slaves to go out into the streets and bring in everyone they can find to join the feast. His slaves do as they're instructed, and they gather everyone they can find: both the "good" and the "bad" are welcomed until the wedding hall is filled with guests. However, one of the guests doesn't go to the effort of wearing the required wedding garment. When the king sees the guest, he's deeply insulted. The guest offers no explanation for his negligence, and the king has him bound and thrown into the outer darkness.ⁱ

So, what does this parable mean? I know, I know. At the end it just sounds like an over-reaction to someone attending a wedding banquet in the wrong outfit. I mean, the inappropriately dressed guest wasn't even planning on attending a wedding. He got this last-minute invitation, and Jesus claims the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to this!

Daniel Berrigan wrote, "The parables of Christ, even the innocent, pastoral, tender, innocuous-seeming ones, conceal just below the surface a whiplash, a shock, a charge of dynamite. The stories set conventional expectations—whether concerning God, religion, politics, vocation, status and class—utterly off-kilter."ⁱⁱ

- The wedding banquet is compared to the Kingdom of Heaven. It's as lavish and complete as you would expect a king's feast to be.
- The slaves represent the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and, later, the missionaries of the Christian faith, some of whom were martyred for their beliefs.
- Those who don't come to the wedding feast because they're caught up in their businesses or their farming represent those who've lost touch with God's priorities or who have been consumed by worldly concerns.
- The original invitees are those who heard the Word of God but did not respond.
- The second group of guests illustrates God's radical invitation as he calls both "the good" and "the bad" to join the feast.

In this story, the king gives everyone a ticket. Everyone has an invitation. Everyone is awarded a seat at this table. Everyone is welcomed at this celebration. Everyone can be an honored guest. Rich. Poor. Sick. Well. Pompous. Humble. Polite. Rude. Holy. Profane. Everyone.

But the final point Jesus makes in telling this version of the parable is this: In the end "those who find themselves unexpectedly included may not presume upon grace.... (Because, there are) ... dire consequences of accepting the invitation and doing nothing but showing up."ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes we think it's good enough just to show up. Isn't that Woody Allen's famous observation? "80% of life is showing up."^{iv} I mean, we're here, aren't we? What more do you want from us? We came to church. We got up and made our way over here on a day off. We're going to throw something in the plate.

Not enough. Not enough. You see, God invites more from us. God knows we need to offer more for our own soul's sake.

We talk so much about radical hospitality here at St. Bart's, but being merely welcoming will not be good enough if people are hungry and we don't offer them food to eat, or if they're homeless and we don't provide an adequate place for them to stay, or if they're sick and we don't advocate for them to receive crucial medical care. It won't be good enough if we don't finally offer people in spiritual need the Body and Blood of Christ.

And being invited here and showing up will not be enough for us if we're unwilling to consider the transformation of our own behavior, our own hearts, our own habits, our very lives. When you are unexpectedly included in the feast, you want to respond to that generosity.

It is truly unexpected, the grace we talk about so frequently in this church. It sneaks up on us and takes us by surprise; this great divine love which we did not earn and which we cannot fully comprehend. There you are, minding your own business, and then out of the clear blue, this strange warmth envelops you, and you believe, you really and truly believe, that you are loved and loveable. You actually believe you are accepted. You come, in the blink of an eye, to see yourself even as God sees you...has always seen you.

Poems have been written about this grace, and writers far more eloquent than I have extolled it in words that can make one weep. Robert Frost once wrote about the wave that washes over your feet at the beach and, with a swift rush and an unexpected power, undermines your footing so that you might fall if you do not take a step.^v Such is the subtle power of this grace.

It makes you want to do something in the face of such generosity.

There's a story about an elderly man in Phoenix who calls his son in New York and says, "I hate to ruin your day, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing. Forty-five years of misery is enough."

"Dad, what are you talking about?" the son asks.

"We can't stand the sight of one other any longer," the old man says. "We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Chicago and tell her."

Frantic, the son calls his sister, who explodes on the phone. "Like heck they're getting divorced!" she shouts. "I'll take care of this." She calls Phoenix immediately and screams at her father. "You are not getting divorced. Don't do a single thing until I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing."

The old man hangs up the phone and turns to his wife. "Okay," he says. "They're coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own fares. Now what do we do for Christmas?"^{vi}

God has taken some pretty extreme measures to gather us together, to make us feel welcomed. To put us around this, this table. But we need to do something in return.

We need to respond in gratitude. We need to respond to this unspeakable grace in order to receive the fullest measure of this priceless gift.

This Thanksgiving will be the first one without my mother. She died this past June, and I find myself remembering what it was like to sit down at one of the Thanksgiving dinners she prepared. It was a southern Ohio feast with the traditional roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy. The green beans with onion crisps on top. Family favorites like scalloped oysters and pineapple delight. Her pies. The *pièce de résistance*: apple, pumpkin, and pecan, all laid out on the freshly ironed tablecloth with the table set just so.

The effort she put into those meals was really just a pure act of love. It was a way of saying you mattered. It was a way of saying you belonged to something special. It was a way of saying we were loved. She didn't really want anyone to help her with the preparations or the clean-up. She had her own way of doing things, thank you very much. All she required was our gratitude for the gift offered. All she really wanted was for us to say, "Thank you." And you can say "thank you" in a thousand different ways.

How will we respond to God's great invitation? How will we dress for the coming wedding feast?

Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, wrote in one of my favorite poems, "When Death Comes":

When it's over, I want to say; all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.^{vii}

Can you and I find a way to avoid simply "visiting this world?" Can we become like brides, "married to amazement?" Can we become like bridegrooms, "taking the world into our arms?" Can we become the guest

who discovers a way to respond to the Great Love of the King, with a love of our very own making?

If we can... if we can... we will be more than properly dressed for the feast that is to come.

ⁱ Ibid, p. 1

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 3, from The National Catholic Reporter, May 2, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 419

^{iv} Woody Allen, The Collider, Interview, August 15th, 2008

^v Robert Frost, The Poetry of Robert Frost, The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged, Edited by Edward Connolly Latham, New York, New York, 1975, p. 391

^{vi} Let My People Laugh; Holy Humor for the Soul, "Families During the Holidays," Christianity Today International, Nashville, 2009, pp. 156-157

^{vii} Mary Oliver, New and Selected Poems, "When Death Comes," Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, pp. 10-11