

“The Robe of Righteousness”

The story is told of a Pennsylvania town on market day, where a street evangelist stops an Amish man and asks him, "Brother, are you saved?" Instead of responding immediately, the Amish man takes out a sheet of paper and writes something down. He then gives the sheet of paper to the evangelist and tells him, "Here are four people who have watched me and know me well. Ask *them* if I am saved."

The Amish man answered as one who understands the parable that Matthew gives us with great depth. But since it is my job as the preacher, let me lay it out for us all. As you might have guessed, the king represents God and the king's son represents Jesus. The marriage feast represents the Messianic banquet that we all hope to enjoy when we get to Heaven. This is especially hopeful to hold on to if you have ever lost someone you love – the promise that one day we will join our loved ones who have gone before us at the Table of God, with God himself as the host.

The king's slaves represent the Old Testament prophets whom Matthew tells us were “mistreated and killed”. If you have ever read or studied the Old Testament prophets, you know that they were not well received in their work. Of course, even in our modern day we know that often the ones who are persecuted the most harshly are the ones who are brave enough to tell the truth.

The wedding hall is the church, and those first invited to the wedding banquet are the leaders and people of Israel – the Chosen People. The second group invited to the wedding banquet represents the Gentiles. They are invited to be part of the church because of the Jews

rejection of Jesus Christ. And evidently God wants the party to be well attended because Matthew tells us that he instructs his slaves to invite the “good and the bad”.

And once all this is laid out, I think the parable makes perfect sense. Until the very end. And then we get to the part where the man without a wedding robe is bound hand and foot and cast into the darkness? Now, this would make me very leery of accepting a last minute invitation. Think about it. The picture created in *my* head is of someone grabbing folks off the street at the last minute, dragging them into the church fellowship hall and encouraging them to help themselves to the mints and nuts and pimento cheese sandwiches. So then, do they get thrown out for coming in their jeans? What is going on here?

Well, as I said before, I think the Amish man understands the WHOLE parable. Because Matthew is telling us that when we call ourselves children of God we are supposed to be DRESSED in his clothing all the time. NOT just when we think he might show up! And evidently this guest was not wearing God's righteousness every day. So when we consider the story this way, what we have is a parable of grace. And a story of the consequences for those who fail to live *according* to this grace. Let me explain.

When God called Abraham to be the Father of his nation, he said, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” This was a wonderful promise and gift. But we all know that it was a gift where Israel had no choice. “YOU WILL BE MY PEOPLE” does not sound like something that we can take back to Customer Service for a store credit or refund. We are God's. Period. So what Matthew is telling us in this parable is that we are to be grateful, to show up and accept the invitation to the grace that has been given us.

Grace, by definition, is a gift that we cannot earn. In fact, the dictionary describes it as “Divine love and protection bestowed *freely* on people or the state of being protected or

sanctified by the *favor* of God.” So Matthew is reminding us that God freely invites us to be a part of His kingdom. There is nothing you and I can do or say or not do or not say that will guarantee us an invitation. It is out of our hands. But once the invitation has been extended, God’s hope is that we show joy over it. AND that we extend grace to others. In fact, a more easily understood definition is “Grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve; Mercy is God NOT giving us what we do deserve.”

Which leads into the next point that Matthew teaches us. The king instructs the slaves to invite everyone - the good and the bad. This was illustrated beautifully in one of the songs that we learned at Montreat this week was entitled, "He Comes to us as One Unknown." Listen to a part of the lyrics, "He comes by flesh and blood and birth in love, to bear within our mortal frame a life, a death, a saving Name, for every child on earth". As we sang, I immediately thought of this parable, having already chosen to preach on it this morning.

And in an effort to help us sing this powerful message with as much feeling as possible, our wonderful choir director must have had the same thought. Because right after we sang this phrase, he stopped us and reflected that we have no choice whether God loves us or not. God does not love you because of what you look like, how much you weigh, who you love, or where you buy your clothes. God does not withhold God's love if you say things you regret, make choices you wish you hadn't, hurt someone you love, or take the easy way out. God *hopes* you will do better and there will most likely be consequences for your actions, but God does NOT stop loving you.

This means that, even at my worst, on my most sinful days, God still loves me. He still invites me to the banquet. God really wants every one of us to be present and so the invitation is extended to all. And Matthew tells us it is a “come as you are” party, and therein lies the rub. Here’s what I mean.

The man was invited by the grace of God but that grace did not give him time to change. Nor does it give US time to change. The change must have already taken place and we must be dressed and ready for the Messianic Banquet all the time. We must be dressed in our “grace” clothes every day!

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls this the new self. And in other places he says we are to “put on” the clothes of Christ. But the man had not. He did not wear the fruitfulness of being God's child, was not dressed in the gratefulness of grace every day. So clearly our new self is not just the self we bring out for Circle or at Session meetings or on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. It is our EVERY DAY self!

I have told you once before that, when I became the Chaplain at Presbyterian Community, I just assumed in my arrogance that the minister would be the most important person there. How could folks deal with the complications of aging without someone to talk to, to pray with, to hug them and assure them they are loved? But it only took about a week for me to realize that I was wrong. The most important person there is the beautician! No one comes between an old lady and her beauty parlor appointment – even God! I used to tease some of the ladies who would miss Bible Study because they were getting a perm and ask them if, when Jesus comes again, they thought it was okay to leave a note on their pillow that says, “In the beauty parlor, come back on Tuesday!”

But seriously, we are told throughout Scripture that no one knows when Jesus will return and so we must be ready ALL THE TIME! And that what this parable is teaching us. The man was NOT ready. And I don't mean that his hair was not fixed properly. I mean that He was not dressed in the robe of righteousness. His living did not reflect the fruitfulness of the grace he had received. There were not four people who could testify that the way he lived in life shared God's love. And he had nothing to say in his own defense. So he was cast out.

That is why the Psalmist said, "Sing praise to the Lord, who dwells in Zion. Declare his deeds among the peoples." You see, the Amish man knew that we don't just talk about our faith – we must wear it! People must be able to SEE how much we love God, not only by our words but by our actions, our reactions and our treatment of each other.

Friends, it is not enough to talk about *faith* and then run around collecting stuff which shows that we trust in the world more than in God. It is not enough to explain the importance of forgiveness to our children and then refuse to forgive. It is not enough to be kind to people who are just like us or to help those that make it comfortable or convenient to do so. You and I are to live like children of grace with people who are unlovable and unforgivable and sometimes just downright rotten!

But what really struck me as the main point of the parable is this: THE KING GOT TO DECIDE! The King decided who to invite, when to invite them, how they should be dressed and who should be cast out. Not the slaves, not the other guests – not even the bridegroom himself.

And THIS is what makes the parable so relevant to us today. You see, I believe that the reason our churches are declining in numbers is because many of us run around trying to do God's job. When all God asks us to do is dress the right way. God only asks us to share the Good News – the Gospel. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel every day, use words

when necessary. So it is up to every one here to be about the mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, and to work for the reconciliation of the world.

And it is up to God and *God alone* to decide who gets to stay and who has to go.

Friends, if we busy ourselves with figuring out who is worthy, who can be ordained, who can have the right to preach and teach and marry and so on, we are using time that could instead be spent in KINGDOM BUILDING! And how can anyone believe if they have not heard? And WHO will do the telling when WE are all God has?

So once we have received the invitation of grace, let each one of us run to the bedroom and throw off our old clothes. And let us clothe ourselves in the fruit of the Spirit - **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**. Jesus told us this parable so we could remember to let God do God's job because if we don't, I am afraid there will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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