

October 15, 2023  
Lectionary 28, Year A  
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 22:1-14  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### What Does This Mean?

(Sung)

*I cannot come.*

*I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now,*

*I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow.*

*I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.*

*Pray hold me excused I cannot come.*

(Refrain of the song *I Cannot Come* by Sister Miriam Therese Winter,  
published in 1966)

There's a reason that we have Sunday School music. It's because in Sunday School music we learn to sing scripture and when we learn to sing scripture, it sticks with us for life. I learned a song that I just sang during Sunday School music at Christ Lutheran Church in Middletown, CT back in the 1980s and it has stuck with me for all of this time; all of the excuses that people used to avoid coming to the king's banquet. And because I knew the song, or at least the refrain of the song, I remembered the story. At least I thought I did.

But when the story showed up as our gospel reading for today and I started humming my little Sunday School song as I read it, I remembered that this is a gospel reading that, in fact, it makes more sense to forget.

I have been a pastor at this church for almost nine years, which means that this is the third time that I've had the opportunity to preach on this gospel reading. The first year, I was preaching on the semi-continuous Old Testament lectionary, so I avoided this reading, but I remember promising during that sermon, that I would preach on it the next time it rolled around.

It rolled around again three years later, but that was Stewardship Sunday or something like that and I ended up preaching on something else. We might not even have read this gospel reading.

Here it is again, for the third time, and remembering my promise, the time has come for me to preach on this reading.

This is one of those readings, one of those stories, one of those parables that, after I read it, and say the gospel of the Lord, I hear the question in your voices when you say, “Praise to you, O Christ.” Are we really feeling a lot of enthusiasm for these words? Do these words really inspire us to praise the Lord?

And especially now. Do we really need more images of violence and murder and destruction rolling around in our heads, now? When we have had two weeks of non-stop reporting on a brand-new war in the blood-soaked holy land? When we can’t forget the war in Ukraine? When we know that there are so many wars and conflicts, so much violence that we do forget or that we never even hear about.

Today of all days did we really need this story, not a cute little Sunday School ditty, but the story of a world gone mad, of people acting in violent, vicious ways. This parable is a story of murder, selfishness, abuse of power, and extreme overreactions.

So, a quick recap of the parable:

People who are invited to a king’s banquet refuse to attend. I didn’t know you could do that. I thought that part of being king was that when you call, people come. When you say “Jump”, people say “How high?”

How much more should people flock to a banquet, when invited by their king? And it’s a wedding banquet no less. The king says, “Come celebrate with me, my son’s getting married, come eat my good food, drink my good wine, share in my joy and abundance.” You would think people would be thrilled to get that invitation.

We know from fairy tales, that what makes people upset is not being invited to the party or not being able to go. Think about Cinderella. Think about Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty. The problem in those stories lie in not being invited or not being able to go. Those who are invited and allowed to go, go.

But not in this story. In this story the people who are invited are too busy. They have better things to do and clearly think that it is within their rights and power to refuse the king's invitation.

So, the king invites again. He's really debasing himself in this, asking twice when people should have been thrilled to get the first invitation. This time he sweetens the deal, sharing the menu with the invitees. "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 this time instead of just refusing the invitation some of the invitees mistreat and kill the people bringing the invitation. That's pretty extreme. And it's an unbelievable affront to the king. This is no fairy tale.

The story gets worse from there, because the king's response to this rejection and to the death of his slaves is to destroy the whole cities of the people who have offended him, which includes people who were never invited to the wedding feast in the first place. They left that part out of the Sunday School song.

The Sunday School song does include what happens next, though, which is that the king sends his slaves to invite anyone who will come to the wedding feast. We're no longer talking about the upper class of the society, the wealthy or noble. We're talking about anyone who's out there on the streets, rich or poor, good or bad, everyone is invited to the king's celebration. That kind of inclusiveness is something that we can actually get behind. The leveling of society where everyone's invited to the king's feast.

The story takes a more positive turn at this point as the wedding feast is full of guests and the party has gotten started. I guess we're just supposed to forget the burning cities. But this story does not have a happy ending, now or later.

Because one of the people pulled in off the street for the wedding banquet, is pulled aside by the king for not wearing a wedding robe. And the king has him bound and thrown into the outer darkness, because he came, underdressed to this crazy and bloody wedding feast.

And then Jesus tells us that the message of this upsetting story, which hits far too close to home right now, is "for many are called, but few are chosen."

And we say, "Praise to you, O Christ(?)"

The one thing that we can't do with this and that we shouldn't do with this parable or with most parables is to make them an allegory. To be an allegory everything in the story has to have a direct and singular correlation with something or someone in real life.

But parables do not lend themselves to allegorical interpretation. There's not necessarily a one-to-one way to interpret them. Instead, they can and should be interpreted at many different levels. They have a larger meaning than the words on the page, but they don't have just one meaning.

The trouble is this parable, even if is not interpreted allegorically, eludes interpretation, even by people who have dedicated their lives to the study of scripture.

It is an over-the-top story, with no one easy interpretation available. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like this but this story doesn't seem consistent with the God, the Lord of heaven and earth, that Jesus himself has introduced us to. It doesn't seem consistent with the God who Jesus himself is.

In Jesus we don't find a God who loses his cool, destroys recalcitrant cities and throws people out of the banquet who aren't wearing the right clothes. In Jesus we find a God, we find our God, who rather than punishing and destroying a city that rejects him, puts himself into the hands of its leaders and allows himself to be stripped of his garments and killed by them. In Jesus we find a God who is the victim of and triumpher over violence, rather than the perpetrator of it.

So, who are these people in this story, the king, the silent son, whose wedding feast is soaked in blood and terror, the refusers of the invitation, and the strangers invited to the feast?

As I said, we have to avoid thinking that there's just one or any answer to that question and to this story, which is one that Jesus told in the Temple, to the crowds, but in the hearing of the scribes and the Pharisees, who questioned his authority and who wanted to have him arrested, but who were afraid of his popularity with the crowds.

It's hard even to figure out who we're supposed to be in sympathy with in this strange and unhappy story. The king. Well, maybe. Poor king, nobody wants to come to your party. He's a little sympathetic, until he burns cities and throws a stranger out of his feast.

The son and his bride. They're too much nonentities in the story to garner too much sympathy.

The strangers in the burned cities. Not the ones who killed and mistreated the slaves but the other ones, the ones who had nothing to do with it, who just lived in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps, we can feel sympathy for them, innocents caught in the middle of a conflict not of their making.

But the one that I'm inclined to feel the sorriest for is the stranger at the wedding feast, a guy who was just pulled in off the street to fill seats at a party that no one wanted to come to and then is thrown, bound and suffering, into the outer darkness.

I said that this story doesn't have just one interpretation and I'll stand by that, but here's one of many ways that the missing wedding robe could be interpreted.

Jesus shares this story while he is teaching in the Temple. It's after he overturned the tables in the Temple marketplace, the "My father's house should be a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves" event.

After that he spent his time teaching crowds and being challenged by leaders in the Temple.

This is the third parable that he tells. In the first one, he tells the story of two brothers, one who said he would go and work in his father's fields, but didn't, and one who said that he wouldn't go and work, but afterwards did go.

The second one was our gospel reading last week. In it, the tenants of a vineyard owner beat and killed the owner's servants and son when they came seeking the owner's fruit, so the owner gave the vineyard to new tenants.

Today we have this extreme story, this over-the-top parable of a wedding feast gone horribly wrong.

The stories are very different, but a unifying theme between the first two parables is doing the work of the father/owner and bearing fruit.

So, what does that have to do with a wedding garment? As Christians, we are told that we are clothed in Christ's righteousness and that we are supposed to bear fruit in the world. What kind of the fruit? The fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

gentleness faithfulness, generosity, and self-control. That fruit is given to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit, but we are called to share it in the world.

The other two parables that Jesus told in this series of parables, about doing the work of the father in the field and about tending the vineyard and helping it to bear fruit for the owner, are about working to bring forth goodness in obedience to the father/owner.

So, one has to wonder if the part of this parable about the wedding robe isn't about the same thing. In which case, the wedding robe, is really the works that one is clothed in, the fruit that one is bringing forth. Then the question becomes, is the person at the feast who was not wearing a wedding robe, a symbol of someone who was not bearing good fruit?

Insofar as anything about this parable makes sense, that interpretation of the wedding robe makes sense to me, it feels consistent with what has gone before it in this section of the gospel of Matthew.

But if the wedding robe really is about deeds and fruits, well, then this parable just got that much more stressful and difficult, at least for me. In fact, it gets downright terrifying. Because I'm just not sure that my wedding robes, the clothes that I wear into the wedding feast of my king are in the greatest shape.

How does my life reflect the gifts of God that I am called to share? Am I clothed in the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control as much as I'm supposed to be? Is that the fruit that I'm bringing forth? Well, probably sometimes, yes, but also, I know often no. The good deeds that I'm supposed to be clothed in are often just filthy rags, not at all appropriate for a banquet. So, am I going to be thrown out of the wedding feast?

Which leads me to the reaction of the poorly clothed man at the feast. When he was confronted about his lack of wedding clothes, he was speechless. He said nothing. He didn't defend himself. He didn't apologize. He was silent.

But we are not called to be silent. We are called to speak honestly and truthfully, confessing our sins, confessing our shortcomings, being honest about the ways that our lives do not reflect the fruits poured out so lavishly on us by the Holy Spirit, the gifts that we have been given to share.

And when we are honest, that our wedding robes, our deeds, aren't all that they could or should be, when we confess our sins, things known and unknown, when we are not speechless, not silent, but speak the truth of our shortcomings, we find, not judgment, but mercy. We do not find mercy in this parable, but we do find it in our God. We find it in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, who covers us with forgiveness, and who lives to bless us and to bless the world through us. And the kingdom of heaven is like this. Amen.