

A few years ago a nationwide poll asked,
 What true words would you most like to hear?
 Can you guess the first thing people wanted to hear?
 You're right: *I love you.*

The second was, *I forgive you.*
 Number three, believe it or not, was,
Dinner is ready.

That's the news that opens today's parable.
 Once upon a time, man – a king –
 was throwing a wedding party for his son.
 The royal household prepared lavish feasts
 to last several days.

All things are now ready.
 (Same words we use in the Lord's Supper.)

So the king sends servants
 to round up the pre-invited guests.
 And no one is willing to come. Not one.
 The A-List received a Save the Date card, all of
 them.

Yet now that the time has come for the banquet,
 every one of them chooses not to attend.

Keep in mind that the king
 is the political ruler of the land.

To snub the king's invitation is to shame him.
 Shaming the king is an act of treason.

Could this story really happen?
 Jesus reminds his listeners –
 Chief Priests and Pharisees – that it could and it did.

The parable is an allegory of the ancient tensions
 between God and God's chosen people.

Time and again in the Old Testament,
 God sets a feast before the people,
 only to have them reject it.

- God provides safe passage out of Egypt.
 Within a month,
 the people are complaining to Moses
 that God is abandoning them in the desert.
- God sends manna and quail to sustain them.

And still they're not satisfied with enough;
 they grab more than they need.

- Next God provides the people
 the spiritual feast of the Ten Commandments,
 God's very word inscribed by God's very hand.

Are the people satisfied? Apparently not.

They fashion a golden calf and revel before it.

The pattern repeats itself
 with every prophet sent by God.

Prophet after prophet warns
 of God's continuing displeasure with the people,
 but the people exercise free-will
 to ignore God's commands,
 satisfied that despite the displeasure,
 God is at least paying attention to them.

And the parable continues:

The king sends another round of messengers
 with a description of the feast that awaited them.

Some beg excuses –
 one is pre-occupied with crops,
 another with business matters.

But the king does not realize
 how treacherous his 'friends' could be.

The invitees react with unexpected violence.

They abuse the king's messengers, then kill them.

In anger, the king annihilates
 the murderous citizens and their town.

Could this really happen?

Jesus is reminding his listeners
 that it could and it did.

This section of the allegory refers to
 a second age of invitation and rejection
 that occurred after the Hebrews returned
 from exile in Babylon.

This was an era when the nomadic tribes of Israel
 became “civilized” and no longer required
 the God of their ancestors.

The people found other idols to worship –
 idols familiar to us: commerce & agriculture.

Prophets warned of God’s displeasure,
again to no avail.
(John the Baptist is considered
the end of this line of prophets.)
Meanwhile, the territories of Rome,
which already covered Europe and Britain,
were expanding eastward into Asia Minor,
including Syria, Judea, and Palestine.
In the last decades of the 1st century bce,
Rome consolidated into an empire under Augustus.
This is the era into which Jesus
was born, baptized, and lauded as a prophet.
Burning down cities was not an unusual Roman tactic.
By the time Matthew records the gospel,
Romans have burned Jerusalem and the temple.
God did little to defend the wayward nation
of Israel.
Parables like the Wedding Banquet are reminders
of Roman tyranny over non-compliant citizens.
Now the king is desperate for somebody –
anybody –to consume the feast he has prepared
in honor of his son’s wedding.
He sends still more servants through the streets
and into the countryside to round up
everyone they can find.
(Notice how this king never gives up.
He keeps calling.)
And this time the servants are successful.
They assemble a motley crew
of worthies and unworthies, good folk and evil.
To have a dinner invitation from the king
would be a delightful surprise to them.
None of them deserve an invitation.
They are on the C-list and they know it.
They are at the banquet solely by the grace
of the king.
Quickly they wash up, toss on their good clothes,
and maybe grab some flowers as a gift to the host.

They toast the bridegroom
and live happily ever after.
Or so we would expect.
But the king enters the room
to mingle with the motley crew and chances upon
a poor fellow who has forgotten to put on
a wedding robe.
Or at least to accept the offer of one,
if he is too poor to own one.
Courtesy then, as now, dictates
a presentable appearance in front of the king,
no matter how lowly your station,
no matter how little time to prepare.
“Friend,” the king asks with forced politeness,
“how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”
The poor guest is tongue-tied.
(It reminds me of a bad dream –
you know, the one where you’re caught in public
in your underwear?)
He doesn’t even plead for mercy.
He is speechless.
Forthwith the king has the guest
tied hand and foot and thrown into the darkness,
to get a taste of weeping and chattering of teeth.
Whoa! We wouldn’t expect that.
And neither would any of Jesus’ disciples
listening to the parable.
They would presume that they are C-list guests
because they honor Jesus as God’s son.
An allegory that attacks the ancient Israelites
for their waywardness is one thing.
But surely the character of God the Father
is not so ungracious as to dismiss
an honest believer just because he doesn’t
Dress the Part.
The C-list is the good people
who come to the Jordan to be baptized by John.
They are the good people
who sit on sun-baked hillsides to hear Jesus teach.

They are the good people we find in church.
 That is, they are us.
 Don't we have to sin really badly
 for God to evict us?
 Can our social behavior really matter that much?
 Are we judged as Christians
 on how well we Dress the Part?
 Jesus concludes the parable abruptly
 on the central dilemma of faith.
 “Many are invited to faith, but few are chosen.”

In our baptisms we, the church,
 are invited into the household of God.
 When we join the church,
 we profess Christ as Lord and Savior.
 But baptized membership means we accept
 the honor of joining the body of Christ.
 It is a false hope that we, the church,
 can remain at the wedding banquet of the Lamb
 by just saying Yes, once upon a time,
 to Christ's call to discipleship.
 Our lesson suggests that there is more
 to Christian discipleship, more to being church,
 than showing up on Sundays.
 As guests at the banquet,
 we have a responsibility to honor God
 in the total way we conduct ourselves
 as church members in the world.
 This responsibility is called *stewardship*.
 As stewards of God's kingdom,
 we Dress the Part to show the world
 God's character and God's actions
 through our character and our actions.
 Let us not be brought up short,
 like the speechless man
 who never imagined that he'd be called.
 We, the church, have a duty to Dress the Part.
 I'm speaking collectively, now.

Being a church takes time, talent, and treasure,
 all of which are given to us by God
 to use in God's service.
 Yet we're pre-occupied with our immediate needs:
 Copier paper. Carpet cleaning. Choir music.
 Christ's call to stewardship cannot be fulfilled
 with only a grudging obligation to give money.
 Stewardship is instead an invitation
 to a life-long wedding feast,
 a joyous celebration to which we come with a gift.
 This is the good news in today's parable:
 God is offering us a place at the Kingdom banquet.
 We, the church, can do no less than
 Dress the Part.

The church – this church – rehearses us
 for the great banquet Christ hosts for the world.
 The church – this church – equips us
 for life in the Kingdom on earth,
 by teaching the ethics of Christ:
 compassion, forgiveness, generosity.
 Dress the Part.

We, as church, respond gratefully
 to the invitation to honor the Son,
 who was obedient to God, even to the cross.
 We, as church, nourish creative worship of Christ,
 who lives and reigns with God, eternally.
 Dress the Part.

The church calls us away from false idols
 like nationalism, consumerism, individualism,
 military might, and violence.
 In and through the church – this church –
 we turn away from false idols.
 In church we grow through the means of grace:
 through prayer, study, reflection, and worship.
 The church is our rehearsal hall
 for meeting with our Creator God,
 in this life and in the life to come.
 Dress the Part.

To church is where we bring our whole selves,
our lives, our allegiance –
joyfully, as gifts to a wedding celebration.
By living the Word together, we the church
acknowledge God’s claim on our lives.

Dress the Part.

It is blessed to receive an invitation to faith,
an invitation to the celebration of God’s son.

It is blessed to offer the gift of our lives
in return for God’s gift of faith.

And that is what Christians mean by *stewardship*.

Stewardship is our grateful response
to God’s blessings in our lives.

Stewardship is our witness
to God’s work in the world.

Stewardship carries out God’s all-encompassing,
unrelenting mission in the world.

We answer God’s *invitation*
with our commitment of time, talent, and treasure.

Stewardship is the wedding robe we wear
as friends of the Groom.

Our alter-ego in the parable didn’t understand.
We Dress the Part.

In the early church, Christians had little difficulty
interpreting the symbolism
of wearing special clothes to a wedding feast.

When they heard the word robe,
the early Christians thought of the white robe
draped over a newly baptized person.

You see, baptism in the early church
was not just a ceremony,
but a transformational sacrament.

It involved stepping down into a pool,
submerged, then stepping out on the other side.
Submersion enacted death to the old way
and rebirth in Christ’s way.

The baptismal robe was the sign of membership
in a different social order,

just like gowns and tuxedos
are a sign of a formal social order.

Wearing the baptismal robe
involved some sacrifice, even some risk.

The wearer was prepared to show the world
a new way of life.

The sacrament of baptism itself
does not make much difference in the world.

The believer, dressed for the part,
remade in the image of Christ,
makes the difference in the world.

We are invited in baptism to join
the enduring banquet of the kingdom of God
while we live and breathe on earth.

In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,
we partake of the body and blood of Christ,
united with those of every time and place
who have ever shared the feast.

We receive with joy the challenge
of stewarding God’s gifts for the glory of God.

We bring before God our gifts,
as to a wedding celebration.

Let us rejoice that we – even we –
are invited to God’s banquet.

*Christ loves you. Christ forgives you.
Dinner is ready. Amen.*