

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23 A  
Isaiah 25:1-9  
Psalm 23  
Philippians 4:1-9  
Matthew 22:1-14

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A friend of mine was really excited about an upcoming wedding. Some family friends, a young couple, were planning to be married in a vineyard on a lovely fall afternoon, with dinner catered by a top-notch restaurant that served wonderful, rich food. It was shaping up to be an amazing celebration, but she also knew it would be a small wedding, with a short guest list, and she respected that. She didn't get her hopes up that she'd be included.

The day she found the invitation in her mailbox, she squealed out loud and hopped around her apartment like a kid. Later she told the groom how thrilled she was. "I never dreamed you would invite me!" And that young man graciously replied, "Well, of course we did! It wouldn't be a wedding without you!"

My friend took such delight in getting ready. She asked a friend to come over and help her pick out the perfect outfit from closet -- a shimmery wine-colored dress with a jacket in rich fall colors, rust and fuchsia and gold. She planned out just the right jewelry, makeup, hair style. Not only that, she had the names of the wedding couple added to the prayer chain at her church. I tell you, it did my heart good to see how eager she was! In every way, she made herself ready to fully participate in this great day. And isn't that exactly the person you want to help you celebrate?!

She couldn't be more different from the wedding guests in the story Jesus told. There was a generous host -- the king -- who had his heart set on creating a wonderful event, but his guests disappointed him time and time again. Lots of people refused to come. They made light of the invitation -- which was both rude and a dangerous insult to the king. So after sending his servants around with generous invitations, the king sent them out again with torches and swords.

But the king wouldn't give up on that feast. He called in people from the streets, from Burnside and Old Town and the park blocks. There was only one requirement -- that you rise to the occasion and be the kind of guest that makes a party a party. You didn't even have to dress up -- a beautiful wedding robe was provided for each person. And when you wrapped yourself in that fine wedding garment, it made you look and feel joyful. We can imagine the host's spirits rising as the banquet room filled, festive fabrics brightening the crowd, the servers finally bringing out all that rich food and fine wine.

But just then his eyes fell on a guy slouching in the corner. The beautiful wedding robe was right there for him, but this man hadn't put it on (or maybe he wouldn't put it on). And the king became furious all over again. Because there was only that one requirement – that each guest rise to the occasion, get in the spirit -- but everything about this slouchy man said that he was not willing, not joyful, not even respectful of the event. Instead he was sullen and smug, and he was finally tossed out.

I really can't defend the harshness of this story – the violence and judgment are way over the top, something we do find in certain parts of Matthew's gospel. Its harsh tone might well reflect the danger and stress that early Christians experienced in following Jesus, as they traded security and family loyalty for insecurity and conflict. This story emphasizes how urgent that choice was.

When we ask what it means for us today, it helps to remember that parables are exaggerated, often absurdly overstated to make a point. I believe the point is that God -- like this ruler -- is hosting a great feast, today and every day. It is the feast of God's reign coming to life. And God wants as many people involved as possible. So God will never stop reaching out and inviting people in. All kinds of people. People inclined to come, people not inclined to come. God keeps on drawing everyone in, including you and me.

So actually you and I are the ones who have been welcomed in from the streets, "good and bad together," forgiven and accepted and given a place of belonging in the great, exuberant community of Christ. God has brought us here even today, to this gathering of worship, to the table of Holy Communion where Christ feasts with us. And God makes us part of everything God is up to in the world – reconciling, healing, lifting up those who are bowed down, bringing justice, advancing God's influence in every way.

God creates a great feast of saving love -- but we *also* make the feast, by what we bring to it. And God is always inviting us to rise to the occasion and get in the spirit of this way of life Christ prepares for us. It's easy to slouch in the corner of God's kingdom, just kind of hang out, let things happen to us, but this parable urges us toward something more.

I don't believe it's intended to scare us or make us feel "less than" or send us into spasms of guilt and self-judgment. Being God's person is never about "measuring up so we don't get thrown out." That's just not what God is about. This parable simply invites us to be God's person as best we can. Put on that wedding garment and be "all in" with our Lord, to the best of our abilities. Make God's purposes our purposes. A wise teacher said, "*Being Christian is about becoming the kind of person who can love God and love what God loves.*" (Marcus Borg)

Our lifestyle in Christ will never not defined by the dominant culture, by consumerism or self-centeredness or angry divisiveness. We are about something bigger. Our confidence and self-worth come from beyond ourselves, from God's immeasurable love and the Spirit's renewing strength. And our mission is to love what God loves -- making peace, sharing resources, caring for the vulnerable, working for justice for those who are oppressed, seeking wisdom and understanding, living a life of mercy and forgiveness, healing this earth to the best of our abilities.

Right now our congregation is facing a significant time of transition. It's disorienting right at this moment, it's true, but I pray that in time this transition will become a beautiful opportunity to reinvest in being people who love God, and love what God loves. I pray it will be a time to consider anew

how we respond to God out of the gifts we've been given...

how we invest ourselves in places of need...

how we share God's love with those who crave it...

how we devote our talents to mending our corner of creation, and allow God to broaden our vision beyond.

We are blessed with so much. I wonder if we can even recognize the great gifts God is showering on us every day. Jesus invites us to give ourselves back wholeheartedly to God who has given us so much. To let God's love flow through us, gratefully.

I wonder what it will look like for us to figuratively put on a festive wedding garment and rise to this occasion in the life of our church. I don't claim to know, but I fully expect that, while there will be challenges ahead, there will also be a great store of joy to be discovered.

Because for all the sharpness we find in Jesus' parable (which again we cannot defend), the deepest heart of the story is all about joy. It's about the joy of an ever-loving God who invites and invites and invites people into relationship with Jesus and each other. It's about the way God joys in spreading a fantastic feast -- a feast that includes everyone and nourishes everyone, a feast of forgiveness and hope and love. And it's about the real joy, the deep hope and satisfaction we find in being part of God's goodness that is working in us all the time, making us new, and making this whole world new.

I pray we will hold God's joyful invitation close to our hearts today. May it bless our lives and bless those around us, in Jesus' name. Amen.