

Exodus 32:1-14  
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23  
Philippians 4:1-9  
MATTHEW 22:1-14

**“Friend, how did you get into here without a wedding robe?”**

Matthew 22:12 (NRSV)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermons have a life of their own. I had no intention of starting with this verse, but how can you ignore it? Even with all of my experience, I am bothered by this part of today’s Gospel when I encounter it. So let me start by helping us to understand the passage by placing it in its context—within Matthew and Matthew in the history of the early church.

Our lectionary basically takes us sequentially through the Gospel from week to week, but the lectionary is not consistent. Unless you are more alert than I am, you probably have not realized that over this past month, we skipped some important passages from the Gospel—like Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his throwing out of those who were doing business in the Temple. As we read this passage and the two that came before it, we are in the last week of Jesus’ life. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and the Temple and by his actions he has challenged the authority of the religious leaders of the Temple. They in turn have challenged his authority to do the things that he has done and to teach the things that he has taught. The Gospel lessons for the last two weeks and the one for this week are his response to their challenge.

Several things in Matthew make scholars think that Matthew, in the form that we now have it, was written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E. when the struggle between the emerging early church and the Jewish synagogue was particularly intense, and the followers of Jesus were being cast out of the synagogue.

So what, if anything, does this information tell us that can help us make sense of today’s Gospel?

First, this parable/allegory is Jesus’ response to the religious leaders of his day for rejecting him. The ones in the first part of it who are invited to the wedding feast and refuse to come for various reasons are the Jewish people in general, and the ones who abuse and kill the slave/servants that are sent out to invite them are those leaders who are already plotting to have Jesus killed.

Second, the referral to the burning of their city is generally considered to be referring to the burning of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and is one of the clues that make scholars think that the Gospel was cast in its current form after that event.

By this time, the early church was really wrestling with the question of why the Jewish people had rejected Jesus. Certainly the earliest belief was that Jesus was the expected anointed one of Yahweh. He was sent to redeem and save Yahweh's people—the Jews. They had rejected him, and the second part of the parable is about the mission to and inclusion of the gentiles in the early church that came after that rejection. Those who were outcasts and unclean had been invited to the great feast when the chosen people refused to come.

This parable, up to this point, appears in a fairly similar form in the Gospel according to Luke, but the part about the man without a wedding garment is unique to Matthew. Why did Matthew include it? It seems very likely that Matthew was looking at the church of his time, and he was not completely pleased by what he saw. Yes, the gentiles had responded to the call to follow Jesus, but the lives of some did not seem to have changed much from before they had come into the church. We see similar concerns in a number of Paul's writings, particularly in his letters to the church in Corinth. They had heard the invitation; they had heard the teachings; they knew the expectations; they had responded to the invitation and come to the feast, but their lives had not really changed. The gentiles could not assume that just because the Jews had not accepted the invitation and they had that the Jews were under God's but those in the church were not. They were just as much under judgment if their lives did not bear the fruit of repentance.

The church then and today has in it those who do not have on their wedding garment. So what shall we do about it? Should we identify those who do not have on their wedding garment and throw them into the outer darkness? That sounds like a good solution! Let's do it! But wait. There are a few problems with doing that. First, Jesus does not tell us what the wedding garment is so how will we know who has and one on and who does not? And second, in at least one parable, the parable of the tares and wheat, he tells not to do it because we are not smart enough. To separate the wheat and the tares is God's responsibility. When we do try to do it, too often what we do turns out to be tragically wrong.

This week we commemorated the life of William Tyndale, who in the 16<sup>th</sup> century devoted his life to translating the Bible into English from the original Hebrew and Greek. For this passion to make the scriptures available to ordinary people in accurate translations, he was hunted, hounded, finally betrayed, strangled and his body burned at the stake. His legacy? This morning all of our lessons were in English translations made from the Hebrew and Greek. None of them were in Latin or in translations made from Latin. He was killed before he had completed his translation, but up to eighty per cent of his work survived into later English editions including the King James Version. Even the New Revised Standard Version that was read this morning still contains much of his translation, and many of the most beautiful and often used phrases in the English language are from him.

So, it is very clear that we are not supposed to identify those without a wedding robe and throw them out, but that does not get us off of the hook. Jesus' teachings do not let us ignore this parable because we still have to be concerned about ourselves. Many commentators say that the man was speechless not because he was shocked and did not know that he needed a wedding garment. He was silent because he knew perfectly well

that he needed a wedding garment, could have done something about it, but he had not bothered to do anything about it. He was therefore without excuse.

What a dilemma. What are we to do? How are we to know that God will not look at us and say that we should be thrown into outer darkness because we do not have on a wedding robe?

My answer has two parts. Now the two parts may at first seem to contradict each other, but they are taken directly Jesus and St. Paul. If they can use them, then I think that I can probably get by with them as well.

The first part is faith. Ultimately we must live by faith and trust in the love and mercy of God. This is the basis for our lives and journey's. Verses after verse of scripture speak of it. Poems and hymns sing of it. Millions over the centuries have found in faith the power of God to save, shape and transform. Putting on the wedding garment is a gift of God. In faith, we turn to God and open our lives to the gift of salvation God wants to give to each of us.

The second part is that we must respond. Our lives must be changed. Faith is not just passive receiving. When God touches us, we must respond.

Has God given us any clues? Yes! Start the lessons and sermon from last week on the Ten Commandments. There is no better starting place. They must shape our lives. But they are the beginning, not the end and fulfillment. One of Jesus' most important teachings on what our wedding robe will look like concludes with "In as much as you have done it for the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." Serving others, working for justice, to end hunger, to bring hunger. All of these critical and necessary, but Fr. Hubbard has covered them very well many times in his sermons, and so I will not go them again this morning.

Putting on the wedding garment is about repentance. It is about turning. But it is not about turning into someone else, but it is about turning with all of our heart, mind and strength into the person God created and called us to be. Therefore, each person's wedding robe will be unique to them. God does not call us to be something we were not created to be, but to be fully the person God created us to be. This takes our active and disciplined participation.

Years of working in spiritual development and formation have convinced me that true repentance at its best is not just about changing behavior. It also needs to include a true turning of our vision, a new way of being in the world. This is not easy.

Annie Dillard, in her marvelous work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, (if you have not read it, do.) tells of the period when surgery for cataracts was first developed. The surgery was performed on a number of persons who had been blind from birth because of cataracts. The assumption was that there would be new life and great rejoicing for all of them, but in fact, many found seeing for the first time as an adult to confusing, difficult and even emotionally painful. One person found seeing so difficult that they went around with their eyes closed. Another threatened to tear their eyes out.

We need a guide to help to us. Many (Martin Luther and Karl Barth among others) have been drawn to Paul's letter to the Romans. I have always been drawn to the letter we have been reading for the past few Sundays, the "Letter to the Philippians". Some of the writing has a rather poetic, liturgical quality to it, and we tend to read it quickly to go to the "meat". In today's reading we have such a section:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again; I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:4-9)

In fact what we have here is one of the best manuals on the spiritual life and a rule of life that has been written in any language or in any tradition. I can think of few guides that would be of greater help than these sentences to guide you in turning to God and putting on your wedding garment. Take them. Read them daily. Meditate on them. Practice them. Reflect on what is happening in your life.

Amen.

**The Rev. William O. Breedlove, II, TSSF**  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
Monmouth Jct., NJ