

Sunday, October 15, 2023
Matthew 22:1-14
“Excuses, Excuses”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Think back for a moment – can you remember three years ago? At the very beginning of the pandemic? How many of us made so many excuses like – “Oh I don’t like going on-line to buy things. I won’t do that ZOOM thing to have meetings, click the link to watch worship, to see my friends. I can’t do that technology stuff, FaceTime, What’s App”. And then we realized, if we didn’t learn those things – we wouldn’t have seen our grandchildren, our church family, witnessed weddings, we wouldn’t have been able to replace something broken or maybe even had groceries at one point! - we would have missed out on so much with what now seem like really silly excuses.

Do you want to hear the best excuses for missing work? These are from real employers: “I can’t make it into work today because”:

"I have to go to the post office to see if I am still wanted."

"I poked myself in the eye while combing my hair."

"I tripped over my dog and was knocked unconscious."

"My cat has the hiccups."

"I put my uniform in the microwave to dry it and it caught on fire."

Excuses. We all use them, some more cleverly than others. Excuses for not learning, not working, not growing, not changing, not attending church, especially for not wanting to be a part of something new. Jesus knew this and it is why he told this parable. So, this morning, let’s explore the excuses we make and the parties we attend as we study this interesting and slightly disturbing story.

Let’s start with a little background. This is the third attempt Jesus is making to try, try to explain the kingdom of God, the will of God, to the Chief Priest’s and the Pharisees. He’s told the parable of the two sons, the vineyard, and now the wedding banquet. And this parable not only occurs in the Gospel of Matthew, but also in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas. Now the Gospel of Thomas is not found in our Bible but it contains a lot of the same parables and stories found in our Gospels, including this one, with a lot more detail. Here’s the complete story and background to this parable, mainly from Thomas.

Jesus had been invited over to Simon’s house. Simon was an extremely wealthy Pharisee. He had big money. He owned one of the largest houses on the hills of Jerusalem. He was the President of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish Senate. And he had heard of this man named Jesus and his great popularity, so he invited Jesus to dinner. Then, he invited all of the important people in town to come over that night. You know – “Look who I know”!

Well, while at dinner, Jesus casually tells Simon the Pharisee, “you know Simon, when you invite people to such a banquet, you really should invite all the people – the poor, the blind, the outcast too.” And Simon just stares at him. But one of the guests at the dinner trying to look clever, states, “Jesus, at the final banquet in Heaven, it will be nice because all of us can break bread together, then.” And Jesus just smiles – “then?” - and tells them a little story.

There once was a king who had a son. This king had been waiting for the day when his son would find a wonderful woman to marry. Time passed and the King's son found that woman. Everyone knew that there would be a fabulous wedding. And the king began preparations. Now invitations back then had to be hand delivered and stated no specific time of the party, because when it was finally prepared, the servants were sent out to tell the guests it was now time to come.

Soon the feast was about ready to be served and the King sent word to the people to get ready. But they made excuses. The servant went up to one person and said, "The wedding banquet is all prepared and we are about ready to serve." And the person said, "Oh, I can't come. I have a new field where rocks need to be picked up and hauled away and I need to build a fence around my field."

The servant finds a second person and tells them, "The banquet is ready to go". And the person says, "Oh, I can't come. I have a new team of oxen and they need to have new harnesses made for them and be trained to work with each other."

The servant went up to the third person and said, "the feast is ready", but the person replied, "Oh, I can't come. I just got married and we are moving in, things need to be done."

So, the servant went back to the king and told him, "I hate to tell you this, but they aren't coming to your party." The king grows angry and sends out another group of servants, giving the people one more chance. This time the people make light of the feast and are downright hostile to the servants!

After hearing that those invited really aren't going to attend, the King sends another group of servants out, deals with those who were cruel to his servants and then invites the non-dignitaries, those outcasts from the country roads. The servants go to the alleys and back streets and invite everyone they see. And these people were so glad about the invitation. They all came. The servants came back to the king and said, "We invited all those people but there is still room for more people!" And so, the king sends them back out to invite them all – fill the house! When Jesus finished his story, he looked up at the Pharisees and asked, "Do you get it?" Blank. Simon and the Pharisees didn't get it at all. Do you?

To be a Christian is kind of like being invited to the wedding feast. Most believe the King here, symbolizes God who joins his son, Jesus Christ, to us, his people, the church, in a kind of marriage. The King states, "Come, for all is ready." Jesus states, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come." The ones who made all those excuses probably represent those who believed they had done enough in keeping their laws and obeying the rules; to be sure of their part in the banquet of the Kingdom of God! They didn't need to change or join with other people. Jesus is saying, "Don't you know? It is the King who has invited you. It is God who wants you to be a part of the party".

The poor, the outcasts – never expected to receive an invitation into the Kingdom. It's not that Jesus invited the righteous, upstanding citizens first, and then the outsiders; all were invited. The wealthy, the worthy, knew they would be invited to such a banquet; but they didn't understand its importance. And the outcast, whose mouths watered at the thought of such a banquet, had no idea they were to be included, until Jesus told them, this is for you too.

When I was in 8th grade, I was, face it pretty homely, you know those little black cat glasses some people wore and bangs too short and crooked? Well, we had just moved into a new area, and I barely had any friends. One day my few friends and I heard that Kristen was having a

party. Well, Kristen was the head-cheerleader who was dating the quarterback on the football team, and even though she lived right up the street from me and said hello to me every morning at the bus stop – I thought, there’s no way I’ll be invited to that party! Then one day at lunch, Kristen walked right up to my friends and I, and said, “You guys are coming to my party, aren’t you?” While all the mouths of my friends fell open, I tried to act really cool and said, “When is it? This Friday? Sure, Kristen, we’ll try to be there.” When all the time, inside I simply couldn’t believe it!

While the feast of this parable is quite different from an 8th grade party, the feeling of never expecting to be included is similar. It is amazing how God continues to invite us to the party, to the Kingdom. And the invitation to the Kingdom is one of grace, for it is grace which offered the invitation and grace which gathers you here, and the invitation is to a happy occasion! That is what it is like to be a Christian.

Think of some of the most joyous occasions we celebrate. Holidays, a family reunion, a wedding. During those parties, we make new relationships and renew old ones, tell stories, dance, it’s fun! Maybe this weekend is filled with celebration for you. This past summer, my husband and I celebrated our 37th Wedding Anniversary. (We were very young when we got married). I remember the day we were married quite well. It was rainy and dark. And the night before, even part of the reception tent collapsed due to rainwater. But when we entered the church that day, all was bright and joyous, and many guests said days later that they didn’t even remember it being dark and rainy at all! Some even remembered sunshine because of the joy we all felt.

This is why, I believe, Jesus used the example of the wedding feast here; the invitation into the Kingdom is not about rules and laws, it is joyous, a celebration, something to be excited about! Often, we think of Christianity, religion, our life in the church as a sacrifice, something that takes us away from our normal life, an obligation, something we have to do. We should attend church – we should attend that meeting – we should be a part of that committee. It should be that which brings us meaning and happiness! We should never need excuses which keep us away, or feel burdened when we participate! And the garments that we are to wear to the party – are the garments of love. Love for neighbor – love for the world – love for all people, no matter what.

So, everyone is invited to the party – the church – and should attend or watch when we want, participate how we want, and rejoice in the good news Christ brings to us all. End of story. But wait – what about the man – remember the one - with no wedding garment, sent into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?! The first time I read these verses. I thought – what?! Cast into outer darkness because he wasn’t dressed right? Come on Matthew, did you write this by mistake? Come on Jesus, why always throwing in such strange things? How can those who were picked up from the streets be expected to wear appropriate – meaning clean white – garments?! And the punishment – a little extreme don’t you think?!

Then I read, this is probably a separate parable, and yes, the punishment is extreme here, and no it probably doesn’t fit in with this parable. Great, now what do we do with this part of the passage? Pitch it? No, let’s explore it!

Some it makes sense. If we go to someone’s house for dinner, most of us don’t go in the clothes we wore playing football in the mud or cleaning the house or weeding the garden.

Right?! And we know it's not the clothes which matter to our friends, and it isn't that we want to put on a special show – it was simply a matter of respect that we appear neatly.

I remember when my daughter went through what we called a Tom-Boy phase. It was all about baggy pants and dark T-shirts. On Sunday mornings my husband was in charge of getting the children ready for church and bringing them, because I always had to be there early. Well, I had bought my daughter cute little dresses and skirts and told her she must wear them to church – it was essential. Week after week I would see them arrive late, my husband still red in the face and my daughter's eyes bright red with tears. Finally, I said – that's it, it's not about the clothes, it's about coming to church, that's what is really important anyway.

Here's what happened here. In Biblical Times the groom's father would provide special white robes for each of his guests – but one person came to the wedding and had refused the robe. Why? We don't know. Now, this doesn't mean we have to wear our best clothes to church either, but it's the spirit in which we enter into worship that's important. The robe provided represents the robe of Christ, the garments Christ brings, which is offered to many and accepted by only a few. Many are called, few chosen. To be called is an invitation, to be chosen means more than just showing up, it means striving to do the will of God. If the uncaring Chief Priests and Pharisees continue to neglect their work of inviting all to the banquet, they will lose their seat at the banquet. All are called, but few choose to live with the garments of love, faith, justice and mercy. The man thought that all he had to do was just show up, not change his actions or his spiritual nature to enter the Kingdom.

So here we are, we have received the invitation to the feast, made it here to the wedding hall, we know and believe and confess the good news. We have made no excuses and are here today or on-line. But what garments are we wearing? *We are here* to be fed and nourished by the Word of God but are we serving and living the will of God when we leave this service or serving only ourselves? Are we clothed in love? Or only with anger at everything going on around us? Are we clothed in seeking justice? Or only with disdain for what we see?

On Thursday night a few of us attended the prayer vigil at the Synagogue in town. While it was very moving and very difficult to hear the stories and feel the pain of the people, they were so grateful we were there. Nearly every Christian church was represented. And it wasn't about Israel's response to this horrible act of terrorism, or any politics, it was standing with people who were suffering, it was all we knew how to do.

You see, there's more to this Christianity thing than showing up once a week or serving on a committee or board. Our faith needs to permeate our lives. It needs to grow and change. How? Through Prayer, reading of the Scriptures, helping others, learning, growing, changing, protesting, letting go sometimes of the things which hold us in place. We have to stop asking ourselves "where am I?" and ask, "Why am I?" We have to stop asking, "what is happening to the world around us?" and ask, "how can I learn and grow and make a difference in the world around me?" We have to stop asking, "why can't we go back to the way things used to be?" And ask, "where is God moving this church and me into this new time we are living?"

Everyone is called into the Kingdom and we know this calling or we wouldn't be here. But will we be chosen because we wear the garments Christ gave to cloth us? Will we put on our party best and ready ourselves for what's next or will we simply make excuses? Amen.