

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen

What's wrong with this picture? People are invited to a wedding banquet and they don't want to go. Messengers come to tell them the banquet is ready and they ignore it. Messengers come again and they are beaten and killed. The King gets really mad and has them and their city destroyed. People are brought in from the streets and roads and the hall is filled. Then the king sees a man acting inappropriately by not wearing the wedding garment and has him punished severely.

I remember as a kid being fascinated by this story. I liked it because the outsiders were invited to the feast. I couldn't understand why those invited didn't go. But looking at this parable now, I think what a mess! Those invited turned up their noses at the party. They treat the messengers horribly. The king overreacts. The "nobodies" are really happy. Yet one guest doesn't get it and acts badly and is kicked out.

The original meaning of this parable is Jesus telling the religious power groups, the rich who don't care about the poor and injustice and the influential people that control events for their own advantage that they are refusing to come to God's kingdom and God's party. He tells them they didn't listen to the prophets through the ages; they mistreated and killed them; they are on the border of doing the same to Jesus. Jesus is telling them that God is reaching out to the outsiders, the no account people, the tax collectors, sinners, the poor, the oppressed, the ones who have no one to speak for them and inviting them into the Kingdom. That's why Jesus is spending time with the people he is. Still, Jesus says, there are expectations of how to live in God's kingdom, God's party and to ignore those expectations is to invite punishment.

We can ignore most of the message that Jesus meant for the religious elite, the rich, selfish ones and the ones that control the power. Certainly we aren't those people! Except occasionally through the years I have heard people say something like, "I don't care what the Bible says, I don't care what the church or pastor says, I" You can fill in the dots.

Really, tho, we are the outsiders that have been brought into the kingdom and God's party. We should be as happy as a lark. And we are, right? One of my preaching professors at seminary was Arndt Halvorson. He told about taking his family to a vacation in Europe. They had rented a car and were entering Rome. They got a bit lost and mixed up. Trying to get where they should be they turned onto a street, went a couple hundred feet and realized they were in the middle of a parade. There were floats ahead and behind them. People lined the streets and were waving at them. They had joined a parade and didn't know what to do. So they decided to stay and be in the parade and begin waving and smiling at the crowds.

Martin Luther struggled to find peace with God. When the Scripture, the Word of God opened itself to him and he realized he couldn't and didn't have to save himself and only had to trust God's word of grace, he said it seemed as if the gates of heaven had opened and I walked into paradise. He had been gathered into God's party and all he had to do was enjoy it.

My wife used to play for musical contest groups. One day she told about watching this younger student who was part of a group at the contest. She said he had this look on his face that was pure joy and amazement. He was with the big kids, the older kids, at this contest and he was just smiling from ear to ear with happiness. He was enjoying the party!

But one person at the king's party had no wedding robe on him. The custom was for the king or host to provide robes or garments so no one felt self-conscious or ashamed of what he or she was wearing. But in our parable the king comes in and sees one not wearing the robe given to him. The king is mad and wants to know what is going on? I haven't heard or read a good explanation to this part until this week. Douglas Hare, New Testament professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary said this part is about the age to come. It is when we face God at the end of life and God says, "You were brought into the kingdom, given the opportunity to be clothed with Christ and His righteousness and you refused. You refused to live as a forgiven person, forgiving others, loving and accepting, using your talents, being helpful and supportive of others. You made your life in the kingdom all about you."

Matthew includes this part of the parable because he is aware that in the church there are people who are in the church but turn their noses up to God and to other people. They make light of others and look down upon them. They consistently lie, gossip, spread rumors and cause divisions. They triangulate, which means rather than talking to the person they have a problem with, they tell others getting them to choose sides. It's like a husband or wife not telling their spouse about the problem between them but telling their friends or neighbors instead. They are not willing to share responsibility. And they may carry a black cloud along with them and also have only a negative attitude. This is not acceptable says Jesus. You have been clothed with Christ's righteousness, live in it.

How do we live in the kingdom, God's party here on earth? Do we value the honor of being in God's family? Do we try to be honest, supportive, accepting, encouraging of others? Are we forgiving of others because we have been forgiven? Are we excited, like Jeff, the young musician, who just thoroughly enjoyed being where he was? Are we working at being the person that Jesus wants us to be; the person Jesus is trying to bring out and let blossom in this world? Are we trying to do all these things and returning again and again to God's forgiveness, the Grace of Jesus that enables us to live and celebrate being in the Party of God? Do we join the party?