

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 15, 2023 Yr A
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

How many of you know what IWC is? It stands for Invite, Welcome & Connect, which is a nationwide ministry of hospitality and connection, which St. Michael's adopted a few years ago. But it is more than hospitality and connection in that it has, or should have, deeper roots in the Gospel directive to "Go and make disciples of all nations", providing a practical theological framework and comprehensive process for engaging faith communities to move from a maintenance culture to a gospel driven mission culture. In other words, IWC's purpose is to provide seekers support in their faith journeys. We walk with you wherever you are in the journey without judgement because sometimes that little bit of support or hospitality is just what it is needed to give us the courage to get closer to God. And we all have a part to play in that and I am hoping that in the next year, that the IWC committee will engage all of us in that important work of helping create disciples of us all.

The wonderful idea about hospitality as a means to discipleship, which simply means to live like Jesus, is that it also appears to be God's vocation. The invitation from God to be gathered to God. And today's parable is an extended meditation on that kind of hospitality, with a few odd twists that show us that it's not simply about hospitality, it's orienting our commitment level to God and as followers of Jesus.

Jesus tells us that a king decides to hold a celebration for his son who is getting married. So he invites everyone who is anyone to what is billed as the social event of the year. So imagine the King's shock, dismay, and utter disappointment, when not only do the folks he invites refuse to come, but they proceed to beat up and murder his messengers. The King is furious and lays siege to the land. Following the carnage, a somewhat more genteel King emerges and invites "everyone" to come, "both good and bad" and the party begins. But then the King happens to notice that one of these guests has failed to don proper attire for the celebration and he is thrown out into the darkness where there is "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth."

That's Uncle Al who arrives in cut off shorts and flip flops. How is it that the King, who is making the grand gesture of inviting everyone, no matter where you stood on the social ladder, throws out this underdressed man, resigning him to outer darkness? It seems so incongruous to my understanding of a God who seeks to include, rather than exclude.

We often say, and indeed, I say it a lot and really believe it – God meets us where we are, as we are. So how does this guest getting bounced out of the party for wearing the wrong thing fit in with this, my favorite sentiment of God? This is the part of the parable that really sticks in our throat. There's a great sense of injustice here, right?

Well, we need to put this parable in its cultural context. In the time of Jesus, as well as in our own day, weddings were important events—and they came with their own set of rules and expectations. Just as in our culture many wouldn't think to wear white to a wedding (unless we were the bride), in the time of Jesus, a person would automatically know that if they were to attend such a celebration, they should don a wedding garment. But what if you don't have the money to purchase the correct outfit? You were provided with the festive wedding garment by the host. All you had to do was accept it and wrap it around yourself.

This puts a rather different spin on the parable, doesn't it? What it means is that this guest isn't simply poorly dressed as a result of lack of funds or lack of sense—he's poorly dressed because when he was handed the wedding garment to put on—he flat-out refused. He is not willing to accept the gift and therefore he is shown the door.

And ancient banquets were usually held at night in rooms, which were brilliantly lighted, and anybody who was excluded from the feast was said to be cast out of the lighted room into "the outer darkness" of the night. In the teachings of Jesus, such exclusion is likened unto the Day of Judgment. "The children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12). "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness" (Matthew 22:13). "And cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30). This expression "outer darkness" takes on a new meaning, when it is realized what a dread the middle-Easterner has for the darkness of the night. In the East a lamp is usually kept burning all night. To sleep in the dark as the Westerner usually does would be a terrible experience to the Easterner. Because of this fear of the darkness, Jesus could have chosen no more appropriate words than "outer darkness" to represent the future punishment of the unrighteous.

So what is this parable really about? Like the parable of the Wicked Tenants from last week, Jesus, here, is speaking to the chief priests and elders, the scribes and the Pharisees, all of whom would have understood in no uncertain terms that in this parable they are actually the A-list crowd. The ones who had been invited to the wedding banquet in the beginning, but ultimately chose to reject the King's invitation. It's easy for us to feel a sense of dread and injustice about the one guest not wearing a wedding robe that was freely given to him. But let's do what Jesus's parables are asking us to do – to understand how we fit into the parable itself. It is true that God loves you just the way you are. But it is also true that God loves you far too much to let you stay that way.

Remember last week, Jesus told us that if we claim to follow God, to tend God's vineyard, then we need to produce fruit. If not, then expect that that vineyard will be taken from us and given to others who will tend to it and produce fruit. Jesus says something similar today. If we claim to be at the party, then we need to live as though we are. We must live our lives transformed by the one we believe has given us the gift of new life. Are we still wearing the old clothes of things like greed, dishonesty, jealousy, and malice? Or are we accepting the new garment of love, compassion, justice and reconciliation? Do we speak and act on the outside like a people transformed by God's love on the inside? Like a pair of old cut off shorts and flip flops,

sometimes our old self feels comfortable and easy to slip in, but God says that at his party, we need to don on the newness of his love and grace and allow that to fit us like a glove. We've already arrived at the party, now it's up to us to keep it going. Amen.