



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday October 29, 2017 - Trinity 20

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.

The passage selected for the Sermon is taken from the Gospel:

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment: and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

There are some Gospel passages that are terrifying. Of those, this parable may be one of the most so. We want to think of God as sweetness and light, of forgiveness, and especially as Love. We aren't as enthusiastic about God as judge. We aren't so much against God sitting in judgement of our neighbors, but we bristle to acknowledge God's authority to be the judge of us.

The purpose of this Gospel is not so much to paint God in a terrifying light, but to make it very clear to us what it is that God cares most about. The answer, as revealed in this parable, is that it is very simply the two great commandments, which we hear every Sunday at the beginning of the Liturgy. We shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your mind and with all your strength. And the second is like, namely this, that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. The lesson of this Gospel is that God, who is Love, is also our judge, but what He judges us for is our willingness to return that love He shares with us to Him by loving our neighbor.

We are quick to recognize the first part of the parable as a condemnation of the Pharisees, or even of the Jews as the Chosen of the first Covenant. We are not so quick to recognize its relevance to us as a warning about violating the first and Great Commandment. After all, how could it apply to us. We aren't worshipping golden calves or pagan gods. We proclaim ourselves to be Christians so this lesson could not possibly apply to us.

And yet it does. The ones first bidden to the feast were good and acceptable subjects of king. In fact, the excuses they offered for not coming to the Feast were the excuses that were reasonable exceptions from worship duties under the Law. St. Matthew's version of this parable is more specific to the particular exemptions. Inspecting a newly purchased piece of land, testing a new brace of draught animals, attending to your own wedding were all perfectly acceptable reasons under Mosaic Law to justify putting one's own business before the worship of God. The people referenced in the parable weren't idolaters and pagans, they were good church going folk using the loopholes of the law to put their own desires above their primary duty.

The purpose of this portion of the parable is to remind us that God does not judge the letter of the Law, but He judges the spirit. That should give us all pause, to think twice about our own worship. There are so many intrusions of life that help us rationalize the dereliction of our duty to come to the Feast, to come to worship.

I am tempted to put my worry for making payroll above the need to dedicate my Sunday for God. We

laugh about forsaking Sunday services for a good tee time across the street, but we haul our children to Sunday practices for their lacrosse and soccer teams. We use Sundays to do the shopping and chores we can't get to in our busy week. We rationalize the day off from worship when we are just too tired, or to aggravated with someone else's hypocrisy, or too impatient to put the needs of the people God puts in our lives through church ahead of our need to detox and wind down.

Even when we are faithful to Sunday services, we struggle to give the whole Sabbath Day to God. And we forget, that our duty isn't to give just the first hour of the first day of the week to God, but the first of every day. How often do the anxieties and business of our lives only take precedence over our duty to thank God for the day. How often do those preoccupations choke away all thoughts of God for the day.

These excuses we give ourselves are not terrible. In fact, they are reasonable and understandable, easily forgiven in our own minds, but still subject to the judgment of God. Why is it God demands this fidelity to the purpose for which he created us, to praise and worship with our first and best breath and living? It is not because he is a capricious, arbitrary and vain deity. It is because he loves us. We all appreciate parent who demands obedience to the rules for his children which affect their safety and survival, God's commandment is for our eternal salvation.

We understand rules against that your tongue in the electrical outlet, or putting a hand on the stove, or forbidding the car keys when we know that our children are compromised, are expressions of love. Giving way to the temptations to put the world before our duty to God is just as critical to our spiritual survival. Giving way to anxieties and worries and petty self-indulgence lead to despair, and anger and jealousy and pride. Putting God second makes us vulnerable to the evil whose intention is to separate us from God forever.

Which brings us to the second part of the parable, the seemingly cruel and arbitrary binding of the guest who fails the fashion test. That is our warning to abide the second of the great commandments, to love our neighbor as ourselves. You notice the wording is not that the guest came

without the proper garment, it was that he failed to come "in" without it. The garment for the halt, the lame and for this guest was already there. It was, as the custom of the day required, made available to the guest by the host. He did not have to acquire a garment, he just had to put on the one that was given him.

We are that unwelcome guest when we come to the feast, come to the worship services appointed, and fail to put on the love of Christ. The love, which is the sacrifice of putting our desires and well-being behind our duty to love each other, is the wedding garment.

To come to worship as an intellectual exercise in theology is to fail to put on the wardrobe. To come expecting monastic silence and perfect stillness for our meditation is failing to put on the gown. To come demanding of God that our needs be met and our vanities satisfied, is to be without the gown. The worship God commands is messy and noisy and sometimes uncomfortable. It is that we come as a community, in Communion, and put our duties to God in the proper order. Putting on the gown means giving praise and thanksgiving to God first, to pray for and pay attention to the people God has given us next, and then to make our humble petitions for ourselves, asking what we would have Him do for us, only if it is His will and if our desire is toward God's purpose.

The wedding garment is the sacrificial love of Christ. That is what transformed the boundary of death for this world into the door to everlasting love and life. Unless we put on that sacrificial love, if we come to the transcendent door, wrapped only in our selfishness and pride, then we are also bound in this world, in the darkness, and with the gnashing of teeth.

Let us heed the parable. Let us come to the feast for the purpose of praising God, and come to it wearing the garment of charity and sacrificial love. God has invited us to attend, and He wants us to be with Him in this celebration of His Light and Love forever.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen