

Text: Matthew 22: 1-14
Title: How Did You Get In?
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This is one of those texts that I'd like to slide by or skirt around.
This is one of those texts that I'd like to gloss over or glide past.
But, this is one of those texts of which Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

There comes a time in every preacher's life when the horrific parts of the Bible can no longer be ignored. The Bible is not simply a book about admirable people or even about a conventionally admirable God. Instead, it is a book about a sovereign God's covenant with a chosen people, as full of holy terrors as it is of holy wonders, none of which we may avoid without avoiding part of the truth.

So, maybe this is one of the texts that I can't ignore or avoid, but if it were up to me at least I'd lob off the last four verses. I'd cut out those last lines about the interloper who gets caught without proper attire and promptly gets tossed out into the alley by the bouncers.

I wouldn't be alone in that editorial move. There were several forms of this parable circulating through the early church. Luke's version ends with the banquet hall full and the party in full swing; there is no weeping and teeth gnashing. And, in the Gospel of Thomas, the writer highlights the excuses of the invitees and ends with the line:

The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused." The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."

Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father

But, what we have is this text in Matthew and it includes those last four verses.....
Well, dear friends, without souring a beautiful late summer morning and a beautiful baptism, what are we to make of it?

The parable is simple and straight forward:

A king is throwing a wedding party for his son. Everything is ready; all the guests have to do is show up. They don't have to bake the bread, or slave over the grill, or bring the beer; they just need to show up. But, they don't come....

They're busy, they're indisposed, they've got other commitments; with one excuse after another they decline the invitation. Alas, the king will not be undone by the rudeness of the guests; so the servants are sent back to the streets to bring in anyone who will come, until the great hall is filled....

Oh, I left out the part where the king scorches the earth of the first group who turned down his invitation.

Now, it's highly probable that Matthew is asking us to consider something other than a miffed King, a wedding banquet, and trouble with the guest list. Many have seen this story as a sort of analogy. Matthew, in this most Jewish of gospels, is setting this up as a picture of Israel's rejection of the Kingdom through Jesus and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. For example, listen to Martin Luther, from a sermon on this text:

.... I prefer to have it understood spiritually, since the whole Gospel is to be explained spiritually. Hence this came to pass when God totally destroyed and burned to the ground the synagogue at Jerusalem, he entirely abandoned faith, scattered the people hither and thither, so that none remained together and they were robbed both of their priesthood and of their kingdom; so that there is not now a poorer, a more miserable and forsaken people on the earth than the Jews. Such is the end of the despisers of God's Word.

Gulp...

For many this parable is a picture of judgment on the Jews for turning their backs on Jesus and in turn the party is thrown wide open to the Gentiles.

But, there is also the matter of that poor louse in the wrong clothes whose fate is in the same as those who ignore the earlier invitation.

In the early nineties I was invited to have breakfast with President George Herbert Walker Bush. Some earnest evangelicals took me to the President's Prayer Breakfast. We had chicken salad croissants and fresh fruit on a private jet from Grand Rapids, MI to Washington DC. We stayed near the Watergate Hotel ~ and for a child of the seventies that was quite a thrill. I walked to the Vietnam Memorial when we arrived. And the next morning, we sat in a giant banquet hall, ate a bountiful breakfast, and.... And, I guess we prayed, but I don't remember that part. What I remember the most clearly is how out of place I felt.

I had no idea what to say.

I was self conscious of my clothes.

I was worried about my breath.

I was out of my league.

I was afraid I was going to be exposed as a fraud.

I was completely out of place.

In this parable the king is eventually delighted to find the banquet hall full of guests ~ until he sees one man who is not wearing the right clothes. He is out of place. Many scholars think it would have been customary for a host to provide guests with wedding garments. But, this poor schmuck isn't wearing one.

Maybe it didn't fit.

Maybe he didn't know.

Maybe he just showed up.

Maybe he didn't like name tags or party hats or wedding robes.

But, whatever the reason it was an insult to the king;
who in turn has him bound up and cast out.

So, if this parable is an analogy, then the question concerns the dress code. What is symbolized by the wedding garment? What wasn't he wearing that he should have been wearing to be spared the outer darkness?

One sturdy reformed biblical scholar (Scott Hoezee) offers this answer:

....it would appear that the missing wedding attire may be the garment of Christ. The Spirit of God clothes us... You cannot, as this man apparently did, bypass the tailor's shop; you cannot (to put a theological spin on this) skip baptism and its stripping away of the old self and the re-clothing with the new self that is Christ Jesus. Baptism is just the point: you cannot become clothed with Jesus without dying first. Showing up in a business suit as you try to squeeze a little God into a life which is mostly still clogged with the things of this world does not work. God will spot you every time. You need to look like someone who was crucified with Christ. You need to wear a festive resurrection outfit that does not quite fit in with the rest of the world's fashions.

Ah....

Therein lies the rub.

Therein lies the holy terror and the holy wonder.

Therein lies the awe – full mystery.

The wedding guest responded to the invitation.

He was in the party.

He had a plate of chicken wings and cheese cubes and a drink in his hand.

He came when the king called.

He was under the big tent.

So, if you take this an “in or out” text, if you take this as the judgment of God, then there must be something more than the invitation...

You have to make sure you're dressed right, or dancing right, or doing right.

You have to make sure that you have done your part in putting on Christ.

You have to accept the invitation and cloth yourself in a wedding robe.

And if that's the case ~ then we're all in trouble. For, what if we're found wanting, what if the robe slips or doesn't fit or we don't get on in time. My fear is that if God can throw out an unsuspecting guest for missing the dress code than surely there is little hope for me. For, I'll be found short of faith, short of piety, short of goodness. I'll be exposed as a fraud, dressed in the wrong garb, and....

And, in that light this text is used to spark fear to make sure that we're dressed right.

There is a haunting, alt-country song, with a gentle lilt, sung by a waif named Julie Miller. The opening lyrics:

*You can have my heart though it isn't new
It's been used and broken and only comes in blue
It's been down a long road and it got dirty on the way
If I give it to you will you make it clean and wash the shame away
You can have my heart if you don't mind broken things
You can have my life if you don't mind these tears
Well I heard that you make old things new
So I give these pieces all to you
If you want it you can have my heart*

*So beyond repair, nothing I could do
I tried to fix it myself but it was only worse when I got through
...you can have my heart...*

You get the idea.

Dear friends, I don't know how to resolve the tension in this text. It can easily tilt towards some sort of works righteousness legalism and in doing so lose the joy of the wedding party. It can easily tilt toward some sort of cheap grace that in turn loses the brutal beauty of a resurrection robe.

How did you get you in?

Maybe the reminder this morning....
maybe the reminder of Lucy Rae...
maybe the reminder of the waters of baptism...
is that we come to the party naked.
All we bring is our hearts ~ in whatever shape they are in
And we are clothed in Christ.

And if we're out on the fringes,
if we're waiting on the wings,
if we're out on the street,
if we're just not sure what to wear,
if we got a little broke and dirty a long the way,
God is waiting with a robe in just our size.

Amen.