

Wedding planning is stressful—even for a king! Whole household preparing for days, weeks: planning the menu, cooking, setting up, arranging the flowers, laying out the best plates, goblets, etc. On top of months even years of planning and anticipation. Not to mention the expense.

Those guests were invited with great intentionality. An honor to be included in the wedding feast of the king's son! To refuse to come, to make light of the whole affair, shows profound disrespect. Dad is not amused. What the queen and mother of the bride had to say about this slap in the face is not fit to print or repeat in church.

Still, this story is over the top. Shocking violence, on both sides. King's messengers abused and killed; the murderers wiped out by the king's army, and their city burned.

How did Jesus come up with this one? Maybe there was a local wedding where some invited guests didn't come? Such an insult. What to do? Cut off business ties, take away privileges. Don't let the food go to waste, invite the hungry and humble who will appreciate and be beholden, etc.

This parable is deliberately exaggerated, outrageous and unrealistic. What invited guests would go to such extremes? *But*, you are listening. The story gets our attention.

Parable is in Luke, also. We might much rather have heard Luke's version. Very similar to Matthew's, but different. Host not a king, just a man giving a great banquet; not a wedding feast. Guests blow off the invitation, but just

make excuses—lame excuses, to be sure. No one gets killed, no cities are burned. Host sends out servants to “bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame,” and anyone else they can find, “that my house may be filled.” And there’s no issue about a wedding robe.

Mt and Luke work from the same source. Why has Mt ratcheted up the story? Who is it for? As he tells it, is an allegory. King is God; slaves are the prophets, including John the Baptist, recently executed; son is Jesus, refused by the Jews, the invited guests. Burned city is Jerusalem, destroyed by Rome in 70 C.E. The new invited guests are the Church, those who believe and receive Jesus as Messiah—everyone welcome, both good and bad.

So, good news for Matthew’s community: we are invited, included, in the kingdom of heaven, the wedding banquet. Halleluiah!

But, what about that wedding garment? What is up with that? What has the guest without one missed? Years ago, read a commentary that robes were handed out at the door for those not sufficiently finely dressed.

N.T. scholar Thomas Long pictures the scene like this, in modern terms. The other guests quietly exchange their everyday clothes for “festive wedding garments of worship and celebration” But *this* fellow, probably dressed in cut-offs or shorts, is “bellying up to the punch bowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt.”¹ (I imagine he’s wearing flip-flops, too.) When the king demands to know where his wedding garment is, he is speechless.

¹ Thomas Long, Matthew (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 247-48.

Well he might be. He has no idea where he is, that he is even at a wedding banquet. That the finest food is provided. That he is there only by grace, and the immeasurable generosity of the host. This is the Lord's table, in the Lord's house. This is the Church, the foretaste of heaven.

Not to be taken for granted. Not to be taken lightly, disregarded. Not something about which to be smug or self-satisfied—we're in, Israel is out. That this guest is there at all—that we are here at all—is pure gift. How can we receive it with anything less than awe, wonder, gratitude?

So easy to become jaded. See all this as just routine, purely obligation, even. It's always here, happens every Sunday and even sometimes during the week. Maybe we can just take it or leave it. Lives are so busy. It is so easy for us, any of us, foolish, frail, fickle, frazzled human beings to lose sight of the height, depth, breadth of the love and mercy we are welcomed into.

Has been ever thus. Here are the Israelites, newly minted free persons, chosen people of the Lord, ditching both Moses and God. Losing heart because they haven't seen or heard from Moses for forty days.

Not as if they don't know where he's gone or with whom—he's up on Mt. Sinai again, with the Lord. The Lord himself has talked to the people directly, as in last week's reading, giving the commandments. In verses that follow, the LD says to Moses, tell them, "You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven." Says explicitly, don't go making for yourselves gods of silver or gold. Our attention span was *really* short even then, some 3,000 years ago.

What makes it even more striking is what is happening up on the mountain, while the people are making a golden calf for themselves, proclaiming, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” The LD is giving Moses careful instructions for the design and all the materials of a tabernacle, a sanctuary, for God’s presence among the people. All this so, not for the LD’s benefit, but so that the people will be secure in knowing the LD is always present, living among them as they make their way through the wilderness. (25:8) It is to be a concrete, outward sign of the inward and spiritual grace.

But what about the wedding garment? What is it that we are to put on? Heard the other day about invitations to the consecration of our new bishop in November. In cathedral, as distinguished from heavenly banquet, a limited number of spaces and invitations. Invitations to clergy, members of diocesan committees; and limited number to each parish. (Fixed number of volunteers and singers, also.) The thing about these invitations is those receiving them have to *respond* and say they are coming. The invitation itself is not enough to get in.

Wedding garment for the feast? (I am getting to it.) There *is* a free lunch, and there is *no* free lunch. The invitation is *free*, open to all, but we have to *respond*. Many are called, few are chosen. All are invited, but few may make the choice to actually respond and come in.

Matters not so much what we do wear. Cut-offs and shorts really might be okay, if they go along with reverence, wonder, awe, gratitude, and lives that manifest the sheer marvel of our being invited to the banquet.

What matters is who we are and are becoming. How we live our lives, in worship, fellowship, ministry—in our families, neighborhoods, work and play. How we live in the world.

The wedding garment may be the white robe in which the newly baptized were clothed in the early church. But baptism, putting on the robe is more than mere ritual, more than checking the box, that's done, move on the next interest or event. Rather, put on the garment of baptism, put on Christ, and let it, let him change your heart.

This week's *New Yorker* cover shows the City in dark shades of blue. Smoke is rising—not the cloud and smoke of the divine presence seen in the wilderness. Atop the highest building sits a horned bull reminiscent of both the golden calf at Mt. Sinai and the bull of Wall Street. The scene is sinister, eerie. The bull presides, lords it over darkened city, casting shadows far and wide.

Quite a coincidence that the cover should appear this week, when we have heard of the Israelites trying to calm their anxiety by putting a bull calf in the place of God it is so easy for us to miss, forget, disregard the immeasurable grace, the steadfast love into which we have been welcomed. And then to put our hearts somewhere else, to try to make and secure our futures for ourselves.

The Apostle Paul is helpful on this. We don't hear it in today's text, but Paul is in prison, in danger, on his way to be executed in Rome. And yet, he writes to encourage others. "Stand firm in the Lord," he says. With clenched teeth, grim determination, worried and afraid? No.

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” he sings, “and again I will say, Rejoice.” To rejoice is a habit of the heart. A choice. A discipline.

Think on these things: whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise. To look for these things, the good in every person we encounter, for the good that God brings from every circumstance is a habit, a discipline of the mind.

Put on the wedding garment. Be clothed in Christ. He will change your heart.