

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

DRESSED FOR THE PARTY

Matthew 22:1-14

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited are not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was without a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14For many are called, but few are chosen."

DIAGNOSIS: Dressing Up for the Party

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *All Dressed Up*

This parable addresses the typical confusion and misunderstanding regarding eligibility (dress requirements) for the Messianic Banquet (Is. 25:6-10). First, the parable surprises us when the fancily-dressed people-the obviously eligible-decline and flatly refuse to attend. They even murder the messengers (vv. 5, 6). Then we are surprised that an invitation gets extended to the “poorly dressed”- good and bad alike-those from the sullied streets where despicable trading goes on (vv. 9, 10). Most surprising is when a person who accepts the invitation doesn’t bother to change into the wedding robe. When confronted, he is flabbergasted and can’t think of a word to say (v. 12).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Self Dressers*

All this surprise and ensuing confusion stems from an assumption that betrays an unbelief deep down in human hearts. This assumption presumes that “who” one is (as reflected in one’s dress) is what counts, what makes one “eligible” or “worthy.” Acting on that assumption, putting on one’s own “dress” (good names, good deeds, status, power, race, lineage, prestige) seems only logical. One wonders whether the fancy dressers who “made light of” (v. 5) and rejected the invitation thought themselves too worthy for this king’s party.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dressed Down and Undressed*

In a dressing-down impossible to survive, the king pronounces: “those invited are not worthy” (v. 8)! They are un-dressed, that is, the un-faith in their hearts is exposed. The king is aggrieved, and he unleashes his indignation, his anger, by

sending the troops and burning the city (v. 7). Everyone and everything gets annihilated. The man without a wedding robe receives the same harsh treatment: he is bound hand and foot, thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (v. 13). Annihilation.

PROGNOSIS: Redress and Re-dressed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Great Cosmic Redress*

At this bleak moment, it is the king (the aggrieved party) who finesses a redress of cosmic proportions: he offers new wedding garments to those very people who have wronged him. (Such mercy, after all, is one of the main features of this special king's banquet (v. 9).) Integral in this cosmic redress is compensation for the original offense, but here too, this compensation is made by the king, at the price of His Son's life: Jesus absorbed the annihilation slated for offenders.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Re-Dressed*

The king offers offenders this wedding robe (His Son's sacrifice) and it is this robe that makes them "worthy" for the banquet. Note the turnaround here. What makes one worthy is not WHO someone is, rather, WHOSE someone is. But a word of caution [perhaps the meaning behind Jesus' words "many are called but few are chosen" (v. 14)]: The very act of throwing off one's old dress (WHO one is) and putting on the new wedding robe (WHOSE one is) is not easy. The process is called repentance. Jesus suggests that sadly there are many who can't bear to part with their own clothes in order to take on the wedding robe.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fully Dressed*

All re-dressed guests now revel at the king's banquet. Not speechless, they open their mouths and tell others about the merciful king who invites everyone to his banquet, extravagantly handing out wedding robes. In addition, it seems that the guests

are what they wear-their royal robes have rubbed off on them, causing them to behave much like the king behaves. Specifically, they spread mercy and goodness around “to the good and the bad” alike, hoping that others will accept the king’s invitation and join the party.