

Year A, October 15, 2017
19 Pentecost (Proper 23)
Christ Church, Mexia

This is one of those mornings when I hope that you understand why we shouldn't take the Bible literally. If you do then it would appear that we have a vengeful God, whose judgment seems to be capricious and downright harsh.

Well, let's look more closely at the parable to put it in context. We can look at the first part of it as Jewish history and near future told in allegory. God calls Israel to be faithful again and again through the prophets, but mostly they don't listen, and they generally treat the prophets badly. This story parallels what we heard in the parable of the vineyard owner last week. Then Jesus comes, Israel doesn't listen and Jesus is crucified. The apostles spread the word, but the leaders of Israel still don't listen, and the Romans come and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple (about 70 CE). Invitations, the good news of the gospel, are being given to everyone by now ("the good and the bad" – the Jews, Gentiles and foreigners) by the Apostles and the church of Jesus begins to grow. And we are OK with this history and the principle of grace that is part of it – but that's where the problem evolves. "... when the King came in to see the guests, those who have accepted the invitation, he noticed a man not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then 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.' For many are called, but few are chosen." The unmistakable question now of course is, how can that be? The man received the invitation and he came – his clothes, really? We have the invitation through Jesus, through grace, to come and be part of the Kingdom of God; it sounds easy, but this part of the parable makes us uneasy. How can we interpret that?

Many scholars have spent years trying to discern to what the "wedding robe" in the parable refers. It appears that there was such a garment to be worn at the wedding banquet in those days and it was something the host would give to the guests as they arrived; so, they didn't need to have their own. But as we know, the scripture does not have to be factually correct.

Therefore, I think it is just a symbol for acceptance, thankfulness and/or appreciation for the invitation. Not wearing a robe indicates insincerity or lack of appreciation for being invited to the King's dinner

- this person didn't care enough about the invitation to dress appropriately, as apparently the others did. We've talked about grace as a gift, and so it is, but we need to do something to accept a gift when it is offered. In gift-giving there are two actions - giving and receiving/accepting. Sort of like a contract an offer and an acceptance. Well, think of a time when you got a gift from someone you really cared about, or a gift you really wanted - weren't you thankful, didn't you show the giver your appreciation, put it in a place of honor, care for it? But, on the other hand, haven't you ever taken a gift from someone that perhaps you didn't like, or you really didn't want the gift itself, so later you threw it away or re-gifted it or put it somewhere, maybe in a closet or box, and forgot it? You didn't go out of your way to express appreciation - beyond the absolute minimum maybe. To me these latter behaviors communicate that we don't truly accept the gift. I came, but I'm not wearing that silly garment. Free food, maybe - respect?

Prof. Marvin McMickle puts it this way: "Within the Christian community there are those members like the ones in the parable who refuse the invitation from God in one way or another. They want to be safe, soft side of discipleship, but they shy away from the more difficult work of outreach and social justice (for example). They want blessings from God, but they cannot be found when it is time to share in the work of ministry (for example). They can always be counted on to share in a free dinner at church, but they are not willing to serve a meal in the hunger center or hand out a bag of groceries at the food pantry (for example). They want peace on earth, but they do not want to work toward that end (for example). They want to end world hunger, but they do not want to miss a meal themselves or make a contribution to work toward that end (for example)." Thankfully, I don't see that in our church often, but I see it in others very often.

In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians that we heard today, he wrote: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (And more importantly) Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Likewise, The Rev. Richard Spalding writes: "Gospel living only begins with the invitation. It cannot be a mere idea; its *sine qua non* is a transformed life (substitute wedding robe, if you will). ... (As Paul exhorts in Colossians 3:12) 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.' ... Jesus suggests that

fruitfulness can indeed be put on like a wedding robe – or a baptismal garment – that the outward effects of gospel choices will finally settle in the heart.”

We can read the final paragraph and especially the final sentence of the gospel today as a judgment indictment – God invites us all, but only chooses the “good” ones, the few. But that’s not a correct reading. We are the ones who choose! God invites us, and we choose to accept or not. And if we don’t, why shouldn’t God withdraw or withhold the gift, if we don’t appreciate it? – if we’re not going to cherish it? It’s only a gift if it does not have to be given.

And here is a final thing to consider this morning. Approximately six years ago, a woman commented on the death of Steven Jobs, founder and until near the end of his life, the CEO of Apple, by saying how much he had changed her life. How many people do you hear saying how much Jesus Christ has changed their life? He changed my life! If he changed yours, let people know. That is the work of the church, and one way we can let God know how grateful we are.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.