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**Proper 23, October 11, 2020**  
**Matthew 22:1-14**

This is one crazy parable. Parables are meant to provoke us, to get us to think and see things in a new light. They aren't meant to have one meaning that is easily accessible. In fact, as each one of us heard this parable this morning, we had our own reaction. What did you experience as you heard it? Did it make you mad? Confused? Curious? Amazed? It's a good thing to notice our reaction to the parables of Jesus. That's a good starting point for engaging with it and letting it open us up to new ways of hearing what God might be trying to say to us.

I wrestled with this story all week long. It starts out credible enough – the King extends an invitation to the socially elite, the landowners and the merchants of the day. I wondered why they would reject an invitation to such a feast. It's odd, but not particularly disturbing. The king doesn't give up. He tries to entice them again with descriptions of delicious food and elaborate preparations for the feast. But they're still unimpressed and they go back to business as usual. That's odd. Who wouldn't want to attend a delicious feast with all kinds of glitz and glamour? So far, these are the typical oddities of Jesus' parables.

But then things get really weird. Some of the invited guests don't just turn down the invitation, they seize and kill the king's servants who brought the invitation to them. This is where I got uncomfortable. Why did the stakes suddenly get so high? And then the king, furious by now, turns around and wages war against his own people. The murderers are murdered, and the city is burnt to the ground. Both parties went a little crazy here. The story is so outrageous and shocking that it's clearly not meant to be taken literally. There is a truth here to be mined but it's not historical fact. Besides, if we understand the King to be God, who destroys his people

when he doesn't get his way, that just doesn't fit with the God revealed by Jesus throughout the four gospels.

So if this isn't a realistic story or even a typical parable, what is it? What is the truth hidden in it that Matthew is pointing us to? This is clearly a story about judgement. But it may not be judgement as we think of it. It may not define worthiness as we think it does. Maybe this parable is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven isn't defined by our standards. We want a checklist. We want clear divisions between who is worthy and who is not worthy. We want to know that if we stay in our lane, and if we check off the right boxes, say the right things, we are in.

Maybe Matthew's community wanted the same thing. They were one half of a divided Jewish community – those Jews who believed in and followed Jesus and those Jews who rejected him as the messiah. Maybe they were looking for reassurance that they were on the right side of salvation history. But Matthew's over-the-top tale isn't quite that simple.

The party is in full swing, the banquet hall is full. Those who accepted the king's invitation are assured a glorious feast. But wait, the king spots someone who has come in, who has accepted his invitation but isn't properly dressed for the feast. When the king asks him how he got in without a wedding robe on, he has no answer, so the king throws him out to the place of darkness. But that doesn't make sense! He was pulled in off the street at the last minute. The king's response seems unfair at best.

But I don't think this is literally about proper attire. It's about how the invitation is accepted. Matthew is trying to warn his community against complacency. The same complacency that led the first invitees to refuse the invitation altogether. Jesus says to us this

morning in this crazy story, come to the feast, all are welcome. But once you come in you have to enter in fully. You can't stand on the sidelines and pretend you aren't at an extraordinary party. You have to enter in, to be fully present. Worthiness isn't about doing everything right, or doing more, or passing some test. What we see this morning is that worthiness is about being fully present. The kingdom of heaven is a banquet and we are invited to eat and drink and dance and live fully into God's promise of abundant life.

The first invitees thought they had better things to do and better places to be. The guest who showed up in tattered clothing wasn't sure he really wanted to accept the invitation. It wasn't just his clothes that were the problem. He was speechless before the king. He had nothing to say. It was as if he wasn't really there. He was just peering in, but he wasn't present. He didn't really accept the invitation to the party.

Life doesn't feel much like a party these days. We are in the midst of a global pandemic; Our country is bitterly divided; We are wrestling with centuries of racial injustice; We are tired, and sore, and it doesn't feel like much of a party. I suspect Matthew's community felt much like we do today. They were facing war and division and danger just as we are. And Jesus said to them, come to the party. Wear your best clothes. Dance with me. Be fully present to one another and to the king and author of all life.

Jesus invites us this morning to lay aside our sorrow and to trust that God has prepared a banquet for us. Jesus tells us that when we show up at the banquet and enter fully in, we will discover our worthiness in God. Jesus asks us to let go of our complacent view of life where all is right as long as we are comfortable. Instead, we are to come to the party where there is always nourishment for one more - we are to welcome others in out of the darkness.

This week may we find ways to be fully present to life. May we notice God's movement all around us. May we pay attention to the music, to the beauty, to the cries of those who don't believe they are invited. May we resist the urge to keep our heads down and be complacent. Instead, may we show up in our finest clothes, fully present and ready to dance.