

Ordinary 27A
October 12, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalms 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Dressed for Dinner

How many times has this happened to you? You're getting ready to leave the house. You're waiting at the door when your spouse or child arrives. You take one look at them and say, "Is that what you're wearing?" I'd be willing to bet that's happened to all of us, on more than one occasion.

Today's message is entitled, "Dressed for Dinner." As we explore this text together, I'd like for you all to begin thinking about what you'll be wearing to the heavenly banquet.

But first, let's again place this text in its context. As we have been for the past two weeks, we're still on Jesus' second day in Jerusalem following his triumphal entry. He had begun teaching in the temple when he's challenged by the temple elders. In response, he tells three parables. First we heard the parable of the two sons; next, we heard the parable of the wicked tenants; and finally, we hear today's parable of the king's marriage banquet.

You heard the story. This one is very similar in form to last week's story where the owner of the vineyard send messengers three times to the tenants – first a group of slaves, then a larger group of slaves, and finally his son.

And so this week, we have three invitations that go out from the king. He sends the first invitation. When the time for the banquet arrives, he sends his slaves to tell the invitees that the banquet is ready. But the invitees don't come. So the king sends a second group of slaves. This time the response is worse. Not only don't the invitees come, but some of them seize the slaves, beat them and kill them. The third and final time the king says to his slaves to go out and invite everyone they meet, both the good and the bad, to the marriage feast of his son.

Just like the parable of the wicked tenants, we have an allegory in today's story. The invitation is first extended to the House of Israel; the slaves who go out the first time are intended to represent Moses, calling the invitees to be mindful of their covenant. When the invitees don't respond to the first invitation, the second group of slaves is sent; this group is supposed to remind us of the Old Testament prophets. And still, the people do not respond. So the third group of slaves sent to invite guests represent the early Christian missionaries, who go out to extend an invitation of love and grace to all people, both the good and the bad, as our text says.

Sandwiched in between the second and third invitations we have this very strange story of the king acting out his rage toward the guests who spurned his invitation. We're told that the king ordered the people killed and their cities destroyed.

But again I remind you – today's story is an allegory. It's not intended to represent actual events. It stretches the imagination to think that a man who is preparing a wedding feast for his son would take time out to go wage war on people. When we read this story as an allegory, keep in mind that Matthew is writing after the year 70 A.D., after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

What Matthew is doing is using this part of the story as an allegory for the destruction of Rome. Presumably, in Matthew's judgment, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were to be judged as unworthy as evidenced by the fall of their city and the destruction of the temple.

So finally, the guests who were brought in we gathered for the feast. But then the king notices – one of them isn't dressed appropriately for the occasion. The king orders this man cast out of the feast.

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I have been pondering this week's text in light of the fact that John Mark and I will be going to the wedding of two of our dear friends this afternoon. We received the invitation several months ago. We immediately responded that we would come. And just like the how king in our story sent out his slaves to remind the guests of the invitation, my friend the bride has checked in with me to make sure we're still planning to come.

Now, my friend has requested that this be a formal occasion. John Mark is planning to wear his Army dress uniform, and I'll be wearing a long gown. But as I thought about this week's texts, I began to wonder: What would my friend do if I showed up in something less than formal attire? I don't think she'd throw me out of the party, like the king did to this man who wasn't dressed appropriately for the banquet. Would we stop being friends? No, I don't think so. Would she be disappointed in me? Probably.

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Just as with last week's parable, this story isn't a call to faith – it's a warning to those of us on the inside. It's a call to repentance and renewed living because of what God has already done for us.

Those of us who are on the inside have already been given our robe for the wedding feast. It's the clothing of our Baptism. Having responded to the invitation

to grace, we come to be baptized and receive the cross of Christ. This is the “robe” we will wear to that great heavenly banquet, when Christ comes to gather all the faithful.

But the warning is that for some, the baptismal robe may have become a bit dirty. We may have fallen short of the living the lives that God calls all believers to live, lives that are pleasing to God because we have responded to the call of grace to be bearers of that grace to all whom we meet.

The good news for us is that every day God offers to us a new beginning, the opportunity to once again wash our baptismal robe clean and begin anew the life of righteousness. We are washed anew when we confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness. We are cleansed again each time we come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Each day we have the opportunity for a fresh beginning, so that we can better seek to be Jesus’ modern disciples.

It is always a difficult task when we begin to talk about faith and works. Martin Luther was always very careful in articulating the proper place of works in the life of faith. He said, “For faith is followed by works as the body is followed by its shadow.”¹

There is a very good article in this month's Lutheran magazine which deals with this very issue. Just out of curiosity, can I see a show of hands of how many of you subscribe to The Lutheran?

In that case, I'd like to read to you a portion of this article. It's entitled, "Lutheranism 202," and is a follow-up article to one printed several months ago. Responding to readers' requests for more articles about what it means to be a Lutheran, the magazine printed an article called, "Lutheranism 101." That article was so popular that readers asked for more.

Kathryn Kleinhans, a professor and chair of the department of religion at Wartburg College, wrote the following in a section subtitled, "Personal, never private":

Hearing God's word preached and sharing in God's sacraments – these aren't things we can do on our own, on the golf course or on a mountaintop. Faith requires the gathering of the Christian community, the ministry – God's ministry to us – of word and sacrament. Christian faith is deeply personal but never private.

Sometimes the Lutheran emphasis on faith alone has led us to avoid talking about works, as if what we actually do as Christians isn't important. It's easy to contrast faith and works, as if they were opposites. But that was

never Luther's point. What he criticized was not doing good – but rather relying on one's actions to improve one's status with God.

According to the Augsburg Confession VI:

It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded; but we should do them for God's sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.

Faith alone – only faith – justifies. But in the Christian life, faith never is alone. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther wrote, “We know indeed that faith is never alone but brings with it love and other manifold gifts.” In his preface to the New Testament, Luther described faith as a “living, busy, active, mighty thing.” He said, “It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”

This is what's “new” about the new obedience. The works done by Christians are an inevitable out-growth of their faith in Christ. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit. Christians don't do good works because they are instructed to do so: Christians do good works when they are filled with a living faith in Christ. When we trust God's gracious promise, serving others is no longer a “got to” but a “get to.”

And if faith is never alone, so, too, the believer is never alone. God's grace turns us outward toward others. Luther describes the relationship between faith and works in context of our relationship with God and neighbor. God deals with us, Luther says, "through a word of promise." We deal with God "through faith in the word of his promise." And we deal with others "on the basis of works." God comes to us, in word and sacrament, in Jesus himself. And through us God reaches out to others.²

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God's word of grace to us gathered here today is that we are already dressed for dinner. We're all wearing the robe of baptism. The word of hope for us is that even if that robe becomes a little dirty, God is gracious in allowing us to start anew each and every day. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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¹ Robert Kysar, "Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost," New Proclamation: Year A, 2005 (Easter through Pentecost), Harold W. Rast (ed.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 222.

² Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "Lutheranism 202" in The Lutheran (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, August 2008), 16-17.