

## Come to the Party

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I must say, Luke's version of this parable is easier to preach than Matthew's version.

### I

In Luke's version a man, not a king, threw a "great banquet" and invited "many". They all began to make excuses and send regrets. When the servant returned with the report, the man said, Go out into the streets and lanes and bring in "the poor and maimed and blind and lame." The servant did so and reported to the master, I did, and "there is still room". So the master said, "Go out into the highways and hedges and *compel* people to come in, that my house may be filled."

The story is drenched in grace. We love the sight of the poor, crippled, blind and lame coming to the feast. We might get in after all, we, in our own ways poor, crippled, blind and lame.

Welsh poet R.S. Thomas must have had this parable in mind when he wrote his poem, entitled, "The Kingdom".

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back, and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

It's like the black gospel song turned into a pop hit in the 1960's:

People get ready, there's a train a comin'.

Don't need no baggage, you just get on board.

All you need is faith to hear the diesel hummin'.

Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.

This parable was told to answer the grumbling of the “righteous” over Jesus’ eating with tax-collectors and sinners. It was told early in Jesus’ ministry.

## II

Matthew’s parable of the Great Feast is quite different. Some scholars say the differences are due to additions by Luke and Matthew. Some of this is true. But what if Jesus told the same story twice to fit the changing circumstances of his life? Let us assume for today that Jesus told the story differently during the last week of his life. He knew his ministry was drawing to a tragic end. So he told a series of parables which have a darker theme mixed in with the grace of the kingdom. Indeed in the very next chapter in Matthew Jesus says in a poignant lament.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not. Behold your house is forsaken and desolate (Matt. 23:37-8).

So hear again Jesus' parable in Matthew. He is in Jerusalem; his life will soon end.

*The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.* It is one of Jesus' favorite images of the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is like a wedding feast.

*He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, tell those who are invited "Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast."*

It is such a joyous image- like the feast prepared by the father for his prodigal son. But as the story says, *they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business....* Sometimes the dailiness of life can blind us to the presence of the kingdom of God in our midst. How much joy do we miss because we are preoccupied with what the Buddhists call "the ten thousand things?"

Now the story turns dark: *the "rest" of the invitees "seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them."* Do you hear Jesus' lament in this part of the story? "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those sent to you"?

Then the king grew angry *and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.* Whoa! We weren't ready for that. Those in Matthew's church had suffered Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and temple in 70 CE and no doubt made the association.

Then the king said to his servants, "*the wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares and invited to the marriage feast as many and you find. (Here comes the grace again.) And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*"

Both good and bad!? What happens when *all* are invited? Here come the good and bad. Here comes us!

The church is a mixed bag. I'm a mixed bag, we're a mixed bag. We bring the good and bad of us along with us into church. Our prejudices and bigotries along with our higher aspirations. Here we are, faithful and unfaithful, weak and strong, courageous and cowardly, upright in some areas and sloppy in others, sighted and blind, saint and sinner.

## III

What is God to do with us? So the story goes on: *But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?"*

Well, what did the king expect, going out into the streets and inviting everybody, anybody? Armani tuxedos and high fashion gowns?

The text says that the man was speechless. I can identify. *Then the king said to the attendants, bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; there men will gnash their teeth. For many are called but few are chosen.*

I heard the story of a preacher preaching on the "gnashing of teeth", and a man called out from the congregation, "What if you don't have any teeth?" The preacher replied, "Teeth will be surprised."

We cannot get to literal-minded here. N.T. Wright, New Testament theologian, said: to literalize the symbolic in the Bible is like saying "Global warning was caused by the end of the Cold War."

The hell Jesus is talking about is the "no place" where people dwell who refuse the love of God and love itself. I happen to believe love will win out in the end. If I'm a heretic so be it.

## IV

Well, what do the text and the Spirit have to say to us today?

I'll start with a Will Campbell story about his Grandma Betty. One Christmas she was given by her son a new flannel bathrobe, a beautiful plaid flannel bathrobe with the reds and blues and greens crisscrossing each other. She was so proud of that bathrobe that the first Sunday after Christmas she wore it to church, walked down the center aisle and sat on the second pew. Her daughter-in-law was scandalized, and at dinner she criticized her to her face for wearing a bathrobe to church. Grandma Betty handled it just fine:

Just hush, she said, it's the prettiest thing I've ever seen, and the Lord deserves the best.

Yes the Lord deserves the best. That's true, but don't overlook this: the bathrobe was a *gift*.

Which leads to my last point. Suppose the king had prepared a wedding robe for every guest, so all would be dressed appropriately for the feast? And suppose the man refused the wedding garment. His clothes were good enough.

Paul said that we become a Christian we “put on Christ” as a pair of clothes. And as we wear him we become more like him. What do the clothes look like?

Paul describes them in Colossians 3:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these, put on love....

These are the clothes we wear when we come to the wedding feast. And if they don’t quite fit now, we will grow into them. We put Christ on that in the wearing we will day by day, degree by degree become more like him.

In a short story British writer, Max Beerbohm, tells of a debauched and unvirtuous man named Lord George Hell. He fell deeply and instantly in love with an innocent and saintly young woman. In order to woo her and win her he put on a mask, hiding his bloated features, the mask of a saint. The masquerade worked, and the two were married. Years later a wicked woman from Lord George Hell’s past showed up and was scandalized by the man’s deception and sought to expose him for the scoundrel and fake that he was. Confronting him in front of his wife, she dared him to take off his mask. Sadly he took it off, and to their amazement



discovered that beneath the mask of a saint was now the face of the saint he had become by wearing of it.

This is our hope—against all odds and doubts—that as we follow Christ and put him on he is changing us who wear him into his likeness.

So come to the party. Put on the clothes Christ has given you to wear, and come to the feast table of the kingdom of God.