

DONNING THE WEDDING ROBE...MORE THAN JUST SAYING YES (MT 22:1-14)

Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges
Sunday, October 12, 2008, St. John of the Cross

The sermon was preached without notes.

The following serves as the priest's reflection on this challenging gospel reading.

We have two guests here today, my mother and father, Chuck and Heidi Cranford. It's their first time at St. John of the Cross so I hope you will welcome them. Last week in preparation for their trip, my mom asked me a simple question. It's one all of us ask when we are going somewhere new, "What should we wear?" She wanted to know how to dress to come to church today and I explained to her that St. John of the Cross is a pretty relaxed place. You can come as you are and I think she was relieved to hear this.

There is something very redeeming about being able to just be yourself. It seems that that is the way it should be, especially in church. But most of us know it is often not like this. Mike and I remember a church where we loved the people dearly, but the dress code was quite formal. Ushering was a stressful job because the captain expected fellow ushers to dress up in suits and skirts. You could sense from him when what you wore did not fit the code.

Our gospel reading today, just like last week's, has some real troubling parts. At our vestry meeting ten days ago, we reflected on this reading and I think the part that gave people the most concern was the treatment of the man who is not wearing the right clothing. Let's recall the scene. The king is throwing a wedding banquet for his son. Now it is generally believed that the first guests would already have received an invitation and RSVPed that they would be coming. This first group of guests would have included the elite, the officials and judges, the wealthy land owners and merchants, the VIPs. But on the day of the party, the king sends out his messengers with a reminder and these guests decide not to show. The king then sends out messengers again, trying to tempt the guests with details of the menu—a lavish meal

with the best meat, we can imagine the finest wines and the most decadent desserts, quite a spread--but the guests still won't come.

The king then sends out his slaves, this time to invite anyone off the streets, street people: the widows, the orphans, the homeless, the prostitutes, the physically and mentally ill, the poor. In Luke's version, the king even sends out his slaves to the streets a second time, just to make sure all the seats at the table are filled and no one is left uninvited. The street people may have delighted in this gathering, having never been inside the king's palace before, nor eaten such a grand meal, nor sat in such comfortable chairs or nor had servants wait on them. But then the king sees this one man who is not dressed properly. He has no wedding robe, but of course, why would he? After all, he had just come in off the streets. He had no advance notice of the feast and could not prepare. The king's expectation of him seems unfair, yet the man is cast out and shamed.

It is easy to get upset and angry about this story when we think of it in realistic terms, but this parable is intended to be heard and learned from theologically. Jesus is comparing the scene to God's kingdom. The king is God and the son is Jesus. The guests, all people, who will meet God at the wedding feast, that great day, the heavenly banquet when we will meet God face-to-face. But what about that wedding robe? In the early church, converts to the Christian faith wore clean, white robes when they were baptized. New clothing symbolized a change of life; a transformation had taken place in the individual. Their old lives had been set aside and replaced by new ones where they lived according to God's ways. Seen in this light, we understand that the man was not banned due to his physical appearance, but due to the way he lived. Perhaps it was apparent in how he treated his fellow guests, how he rushed selfishly to eat before others, or stole his place in line. Maybe he was unkind or cruel, we just will never know. But for whatever reason, he was not prepared for God's feast.

What a relief that God does not judge us based on how we look or what we wear, that Jesus accepts us "just as we are." Woody Allen once said, "Eighty percent of life is just showing up." Certainly this is true. We all know the importance of being there.

After all, a big part of this parable is about the contrast between the street people who show up and the VIPs who do not.

But saying yes and showing up is just the first step. We must not forget that the other 20 percent of life still matters and can be the most challenging. Just like a marriage, saying yes to God means investing in the relationship, inclusion of the other, love and trust. Donning the wedding robe is like what Paul describes as “putting on the armor of light,” symbolizing a change of life and reordering of priorities by placing God and others before ourselves. Simply put, faith requires follow-through.

Jesus says that, “Many are called, but few are chosen. All of us are on God’s guest list. God calls all people from the first to the last to God’s feast. In fact, God sends out numerous invitations to us, again and again throughout our lives. But how we respond is a personal choice we make, each and every day.