

Dressing Well

The stories Jesus tells are very much like archeology.

Sometimes the treasures are right on the surface, and are easy pickings.

Other times, you got to dig.

Today, we dig.

When you take a close look at today's parable, it's a very strange tale, made all the stranger because Jesus says that in this story, we get a peek at the Kingdom of God.

And what a weird place this Kingdom is.

The king issues his invitation, which is rudely rejected.

The king gets really mad and wipes out everyone who was on the first guest list.

Then, while the city is still smoldering on Oahu, the king sends out another invitation to anyone and everyone living on Kauai and Maui and the Big Island.

No references are required, no criminal background check is conducted.

In the version we read today, it says the "good and the bad" are rounded up.

But in the original Greek, it's reversed: the "bad and the good" are rounded up.

Maybe it says "the bad and the good" to make the point that the invitation of God is to all people, reminding us that "all people" includes those who are bad; reminding us that we are called to bring the good news of this invitation to everyone, even to the ones who, to my way of thinking, or yours, are "bad."

But I digress.

Once everyone is in the hall, the story gets even stranger.

One fellow shows up in jeans and a tee shirt.

No tuxedo.

And he is promptly booted out of the fun.

At first, this seems incredibly arbitrary, even cruel.

Who keeps a tux nearby just in case you get a last minute wedding invitation?

So why is the guy in jeans and a tee shirt in such hot water?

To figure that out, we need the pick and shovel.

Now, we dig.

This story is intended to take us beneath the surface, so that the missing wedding garment is not about a tuxedo at all; the missing tuxedo is a symbol for actually living the life of our faith.

As you know, St. Paul uses the analogy of clothing just like this in so many places.

To the Galatians, he encourages them to put on the baptismal garment of Christ.

To the Colossians, he implores them to clothe themselves in compassion, kindness, mercy, meekness and patience.

It's not only Paul who talks like this.

Isaiah speaks of God clothing Israel with righteousness and Peter encourages his small community to be clothed in humility.

So the reason this guy in blue jeans is in so much trouble is not because he left his tux at home.

He's in trouble because rather than acting like an honored guest, rather than experiencing a sense of awe at the sheer mercy of a host who rounds up every last man, woman and child, deserving and undeserving; rather than having a sense of quiet gratitude, our friend bellies up to the bar and stuffs his face with the shrimp cocktail; gulps down the spiked punch, and wipes his hands on his tee shirt: totally stuck in self-absorbed self-satisfaction.

He apparently sees no difference between "All You Can Eat Night" at Sizzler's and the wedding feast for the King's son.

Let's bring it closer to home.

The guy with no wedding garment is the same guy who comes to church each Sunday, but who brings along, almost defiantly, the world's values of competition, of anger, of ego and pride; who sits in the church pew, who takes the bread and the cup, and yet rejects everything that Jesus stands for, everything that Jesus died to show us.

That's why this fellow is in trouble.

He rejects his baptismal clothing of kindness, meekness, humility, compassion; insisting on the jeans and tee shirt of ego-driven self-righteousness.

So absorbed is this fellow in himself that when the king confronts him, he is dumbfounded, he is speechless.

The terribly uncomfortable cannon ball that Jesus launches at us today is not complicated; but it is also not easy to hear.

Written on that cannon ball is this message: "faith that fails to change us is no faith at all."

Our faith, if it is alive, will change us; and change we must if we wish to wear the wedding garment of the kingdom of God.

It is a garment sewn not by hands, but by the heart.

We are not, as a people, so different from those ancient Israelites, who, once Moses is gone for a few days, move fast as lightening to create gods with their own hands.

We have plenty of golden calves these days.

Our golden calves are whatever we put in place of the strange God who is so different from us: this God who dies rather than kills; who longs to forgive, to include, to save.

Make no mistake, the worship of false idols is in full swing today.

They go by many names, the most popular are money, power and fame.

They have their own creeds, which are statements of faith, like "might makes right," and "look out for number one," and "God helps those who help themselves."

It is the work of the powers and principalities of this world, who, fallen as we are, seek to replace the living God.

We cannot face them alone.

To do so is to be devoured.

So we gather here each week, all of us together, the bad and the good, to wash ourselves yet again, to put on once again our baptismal clothing; and against all odds and against pressure from every quarter, we recommit ourselves to the practice of "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable."

From these come the wedding garments suitable for a guest of the King.

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