

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 15, 2023 – PENTECOST 20 / PROPER 23 (YR. A)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*This Party Ain’t ‘Come as You Are!’*”*

Isaiah 25:1-9 (God will save and comfort His people)
Psalm 23 (The Lord cares for His people like a good shepherd)
Philippians 4:1-9 (Rejoice in the Lord; think on what is excellent)
St. Matthew 22:1-14 (Jesus’ parable of the wedding banquet)

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a party, which sounds like good news, if you love parties. Personally, I’m not a big fan of parties. In fact, I generally dread receiving an invitation to any social occasion. Anxious questions immediately spring to mind, such as: “What should I wear?” “Who else will be there?” “How will I be able to keep up with the small talk?” and, “Is there some way I can get out of it?” When it comes to class reunions and fundraisers I *categorically* refuse to go. Of course, parties are meant to be fun. But we all know that *some* social gatherings are so boring, stuffy, crowded, or overlong, they are simply to be endured, albeit perhaps helped along by a couple of stiff drinks.

So when Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is like a party,” what sort of get-together is it? The shindig Jesus is talking about is a royal wedding party, which means it’s a highly significant festivity, one with a more exclusive guest list than you’d find even at Buckingham Palace or the White House.

All of the important people have been invited—the nobles, the clergy, the politicians and lawyers, community leaders, business people, the movers and shakers from across the King’s domain—but, strangely, none of them want to attend! (Last week, we heard about the terrible tenants. This Sunday’s lesson is about the ghastly guests.)

The King is taken aback by their refusal to RSVP, so He reissues His invitation more forcefully, lest anyone might have misunderstood the exact nature of the celebration, or perhaps missed the fact that not attending is not an option. Still, the invited guests fail to take their host seriously.

One wealthy woman has an appointment for a spa day she simply can’t break. Another big-shot had set aside that day to shop for a new sports car. And others of the invited guests were so annoyed at being bothered *again* by the King, they set their pedigreed pit bulls on his messengers, and killed them.

Angered by this massacre, the King sends His army out to murder the murderers. Afterward, the King’s servants are somewhat surprised to find their Master is still in the mood for a party. So He sends His messengers out again. But this time, instead of sending them to the corridors of power (which, by now have all been burned to the ground), He sends them to anyone, everywhere. “Drag them in from the streets,” the King orders, “the good and the bad.”

In St. Luke’s parallel account, where a lot less people get beaten-up or killed, Jesus says: “Go out at once into ... the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame ... Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled” (14:21-23).

This time, no one takes the King’s invitation lightly. They all show up! And so the story seems to conclude with a happy scene at a lavish palace filled with guests enjoying a terrific party (despite the lingering odor of recently scorched lands). Everyone appears to be having a good time. The King is there at His wedding banquet, but who is the bride? His Bride is *the Church*, that is, those guests who’ve said “Yes to the Dress” and have shown up. As together the King and His Bride celebrate the fullest completion of their loving union, they encounter one guest who hasn’t bothered to dress properly.

“Hey pal,” He barks, “Where’s your tux?” This poor shlub who’s come straight from work and is still in his dirty overalls, doesn’t know what to say. So the King calls the security guards, who slap the guy around, then throw him out into the outer parking lot (where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth).

In Luke’s gospel, the parable is told as part of Jesus’ justification for why He hangs out with so many social drop-outs and rejects. But in Matthew’s account, the parable is delivered as part of Jesus’ ongoing tirade against the religious establishment.

Last Sunday, we saw how, Jesus came out with, “the parable of the bad tenants” who refuse to pay rent to the owner, end up murdering the real estate agents, and killing the owner’s Son. And now, this “parable of the wedding banquet”—where the celebration is set against a backdrop of punishing violence.¹

Each of these stories is an allegory set within Jesus’ final days on earth, and deals with His rejection by the Jewish leaders and many of the people. However, this allegory raises the stakes considerably, because the King’s Wedding Banquet occurs *after* the rejection of the Jews; *after* the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; and *after* the ingathering of the Gentiles. It has to do with the Final Judgment.

And what is the basis of that Judgment? It is not simply whether we say “yes” or “no” to Christ’s invitation to eternal life. After all, Matthew tells us that invitation is extended to “both good and bad” people. Just because we are invited does not mean there are no standards, no expectations of the guests.²

A wedding garment—that is, being clothed with new life in Christ and His righteousness—is expected of us. Yes, the King—who is God—is merciful and forgiving, but He will not let us into the party that is Heaven, without our coming adorned with repentance, obedience, and holiness.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote that “the wedding garment” is “charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.”³ Augustine explained that for us to have “love” is not itself sufficient, because a person might *love* evil or crime, but what is necessary to enter the Kingdom of God is a love that comes out of a pure and holy heart, from a right moral conscience, and from a faith that is genuine.

I found it interesting that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, interpreted this parable as Christ warning us not to approach His Banquet Table—which is the Holy Eucharist—without being *spiritually prepared*. And Augustine’s description of how we should be clothed for heaven is appropriate for partaking of Communion, as well.

God’s Wedding Feast in the Kingdom of Heaven is not the sort of party where you come as you are. It’s a banquet to which you arrive on time, come dressed to the nines, and from which, if you choose to stay away—for whatever excellent excuse—you do so at your own peril.

In other words: We have a choice to make. Don’t feel sorry for those self-righteous unfortunates who were invited first. Instead of being open to Christ’s invitation to eternal joy, they were calculating. And that calculation did them no good. Don’t leave His invitation lying on your desk without sending a “Yes, Lord,” response. And even if you have already RSVP’d to His gracious words, “Come unto Me,” with an open heart, make sure Christ’s offer of redemption touches your mind and soul so profoundly that you commit to being fully prepared for the Great Wedding Banquet of the Lamb and His Bride.

For all we know, the King may be here sooner than we imagine, and we must be ready for His party. There’s no time to lose. Say “Yes to the Dress,” and clothe yourself in the joy of your salvation—then *live it out*, in a rip-roaring celebration of righteousness, grace, and peace.⁴

Let us pray: Dear Lord, You who are the Holy Bridegroom and King of Heaven, please remind us daily that Colossians 3:12 enjoins us to, “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe [ourselves] with *compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience*. Give us grace to wear these garments gladly, such that we may be seated at Your table—both here and in eternity—with feasting and joy. We ask this in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. *Amen*.

^{*} Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 12 October 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. David Smith, “The Parable of the Great Big Party,” [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-of-the-great-big-party-matthew-221-14-david-smith-sermon-on-jesus-ministry-114082.asp?>), 12 November 2007, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-of-the-great-big-party-matthew-221-14-david-smith-sermon-on-jesus-ministry-114082.asp?> 9 October 2023.

² Adapt. Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year A* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press Int’l., 1992), pp. 474-475

³ Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1844), pp. 337-39.

⁴ Adapt. Christopher Burkett, “Be Ready for the Wedding,” [PreacherRhetorica.com](http://www.preacherrhetorica.com/), 6 October 2014, <http://www.preacherrhetorica.com/> 11 October 2014.