

Come As You Are?

The seminary in Charlotte has begun their fall term and like most campuses the primary work is being done virtually. The majority of the classes are still being held on Saturday, and the custom of holding a worship service in the middle of the day continues. Tony has enrolled in the doctorate of divinity program and when Jane Mitchell who serves as the chaplain for the seminary realized that last fall, she contacted both Tony and I and asked us to do a joint worship service for the noon chapel on a date that Tony would be in Charlotte for his degree work. October 10th was selected and then the world around us changed. However, yesterday Tony and I “Zoomed” the chapel service together. We were not able to do what we had initially planned, but I bring this up because the focus of the sermon Tony preached and the message within it resonates strongly with the reason I placed a question mark at the end of today’s sermon title. The title he gave for this same passage was much better: What not to wear! And thinking about that title, it also occurred to me that that line of thought applies well to the Exodus passage and those Israelites waiting for Moses at the foot of Mt. Sinai: What not to do! Although twelve chapters separate the passage where the commandments are spoken to the people by God and we are told that Moses has been up on the mountain top with God for forty days, these in-between chapters are further instructions about behaviors as well as descriptions for observances of religious festivals. It is at chapter 24, that we are actually told Moses goes up and enters the cloud on the mountain top. This is followed by more instructions about the Tabernacle which they are to build. While scripture is recording these things, the people are just waiting for Moses to return from the mountain top...and as we find out with the first verse in today’s reading, they are not handling the waiting at all well. In Exodus 24 where we are told Moses is actually leaving to go up to speak with God, Moses leaves them saying: “Wait here for us, until we come again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” Well, in chapter 32:1, they have a dispute and they take it to Aaron with a vengeance. This dispute is another in the already long series of disputes that they have had on this journey. From the moment the Israelites left their homes in Egypt and headed down to the seashore on their way to the wilderness, they were saturated with impatience. First they thought Pharaoh’s army was going to slaughter them all. Then they thought they would starve; they thought they would dehydrate. Even though they are still receiving manna in the morning and quail arrive in the evening...Moses is taking too long on the mountain top talking to God whose thunder and earthquakes can still be felt; that cloud on the mountain top is still very visible. So what is their response to this waiting? Do they spend time in giving thanks for their freedom and escape from Egypt? Or for the leader sent by God who stood up to Pharaoh for them? Or for the miracles of water and food in the wilderness which they are still receiving? No, they become impatient and begin to seek to reestablish the things which were familiar to them; they wanted to see idols like those they had seen worshiped in Egypt. Those idols were visual and

measurable; those idols could be controlled; they could be put in a place and they remained there. Not like this God who spoke from a cloud and moved with them; who then ask things of them; things that they did not expect. This they were following into the wilderness God was not predictable, and in their uncertainty they wanted the familiar; they tried to fashion something that they could contain and measure. It occurred to me that we often try to do that as well by fashioning gods out of wealth or social status; things that we can measure. The people waiting at the base of the mountain again exhibit impatience, but also something else. They have confused Moses, whom they can see, with the God who spoke to them from the cloud when they say that it was Moses who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. In this passage they are breaking first commandments they have promised to obey even before demanding the creation of the “god”, the idol made of gold, to go before them. They have substituted and continue to want to substitute what they can see or create for themselves the God who has invited them into covenant relationship. Certainly, examples for us of what not to do. Our next passage comes from the gospel of Matthew, and this is another parable which Jesus tells those chief priests and others who have questioned him in the temple courtyard in this last week of his ministry. This parable is one which is complex and has often been used in less than admirable ways; it is one that many term ugly and others refuse to address preferring to simply use a very similar parable found in Luke’s gospel, chapter 14. There are very many similarities...the preparations and invitations to a celebratory feast are the basis of both. However as is pointed out in almost every commentary, the context in which Jesus tells these two parables is very different. In Luke, the parable is told where Jesus is the dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee. Here in Matthew, he is facing those who are attempting and will indeed shortly succeed in bringing about his arrest and crucifixion; definitely a different context which could easily explain the violence present in the parable in this second telling. Many commentaries explain the difference as an attempt by the author of Matthew to explain why Jesus was rejected by many and the division which was occurring between those who remained in the synagogues and those who were forming new assemblies. That may be true; it may be one factor; or it may be that Jesus told the same basic story more than once varying it depending upon his audience. From our perspective, we cannot know. What we do have before us is a parable which contains a message which Jesus tells us is to give us some information about the kingdom of heaven. For that reason I am going with what Rev. Robert Capon had to say in his book Parables of Judgment¹. He explains that Jesus was an effective teacher who would have varied his stories depending upon the audience and the point that he wished to make with them. This is still a common practice among anyone who addresses an audience, so my take on these two occurrences is that the differences began with Jesus and those he was addressing and when he was speaking with them. The most notable difference between the two presentations of the banquet is the amount of violence depicted in the

¹ Capon, Parables of Judgment, Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, 1989

second. This violence dominates the story and is why it is so often called ugly. It has been used to justify the violence of anti-Semitism so any treatment which seems to justify the violence must walk a careful line in interpretation for the parable is only directed against those who are actively seeking to cause Jesus' death. What is the dominate feature of the parable is where it begins...it begins...as does the one in Luke...with invitation. The king is planning a wedding banquet for his son and has sent out invitations for the celebration. There is a feast being planned. When the invitations that were sent out did not result in the expected positive RSVP's for such an occasion, the king sends out personal invitations in the form of personal representatives. He does this not just once, but twice...even adding the enticements of giving the readiness and ampleness of the menu. In this telling Jesus is explaining about the invitation which is being given...the grace being extended...even to those who have up to now refused to listen. The invitation to the banquet is still open...come. But even this does not get these invited guests to come. Some of them seem to just ignore the message and go on about their lives but there are others who respond violently to the invitation, killing those who bring the invitation to them. The violence doesn't stop there. The king becomes enraged, sends his troops to destroy the murderers and burn their city. For Matthew's congregations, this could easily be seen as the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in response to Jesus' rejection by the religious leaders. But why this extreme reaction? Those who have refused to come to the celebration of the king are those who have a right to be at the party, but they lack the essential element: trust, the faith in the host who is inviting them so that they come. They seem to think that their own concerns are more important...some business deal or work that needs to be done at the farm ranks above allegiance to the king. Jesus is emphasizing that outside the invitation to the banquet God provides there is no other activity. God has paid for the party and grace has supplied the invitations. Acceptance is the only choice which leads to life. Judgment has come but only after grace has been offered. In the parable, it appears that the king moves to plan B, but what has been plan A for God all along. The king now sends his slaves out into the streets telling them that the feast is ready and will go on. Since those invited did not come because they relied on their own activities rather than join in the celebration of their king, they were not worthy of the invitation. Now these slaves are to go out and invite everyone that they can find to come in and enjoy the banquet; both good and bad. This inclusion of both good and bad is not unique to this parable but is present in other parables. In the wheat and tares, both are allowed to grow together, in the parable of the sower, the sowing is prodigal...widespread with both good and bad results. So as the parable progresses, the kings banquet hall is filled with guests; the doors are flung wide open for all to enter and enjoy the feast; grace abounds in this invitation to come and feast. This is definitely good news for us to celebrate. We have been invited to come in and celebrate; grace has been extended to all...we need to remember that the invitation is to all who would come and join. Accept with joy the invitation we have been given, come and celebrate the gift of grace. It seems so simple.

Yet so many have issues with the generosity of the invitation, want to “earn” it and want to set boundaries on who else may attend. Perhaps that is why the parable does not end with the banquet hall being filled with those invited off the streets. We have those other verses where the king comes in to look over and enjoy this celebration. And suddenly there is a problem again. There is someone who the king notices that stand out...since people were brought in at random off the streets you would think that would be hard to do...to stand out in such a mixed crowd. But evidently, when the invitation was accepted, the guests were provided with a wedding robe...the parable itself does not explain this garment for us...there is no information given about guest being provided garments in the beginning of the parable...presumably because for those initial guest all would have had appropriate attire had they chosen to come. But when people were invited in off the streets, it is unlikely either group mentioned the good or the bad would have been wearing celebratory attire. But they have accepted the invitation and entered the banquet hall and now it seems all but this one person have on appropriate garments...garments suited to the celebration of the son’s wedding. So as the parable continues, the king enters the banquet hall where the feasting is taking place and sees this one person who is not suitable attired. The king approaches him and asks how did this happen...how did you get in without a wedding robe? Not being given a description of what a suitable wedding robe would be, we can only make the connection that since this celebration represents the celebration that God desires in God’s own realm that the attire is related to what is referred to in other places as “clothing oneself Christ.” This joyous celebration in the kingdom of heaven would seem to have guests that in appreciation of that invitation would adopt and adapt their ways to the teachings of Jesus...perhaps that transformation is the wedding robe. That the king asks this question seems to imply that the proper attire was provided to the guests as they entered but for some reason we again have a rejection of what the king is providing by an invited guest. In asking this question, the king is inviting the one who has again rejected full acceptance into the celebration to enter into a conversation, a potential relationship. In other words, again in the face of rejection, an invitation to fully join the celebration is given, another change to accept grace is being offered. The response recorded is that the man was speechless. He did not even engage with the king in this offer...he did not give a reason for his rejection of this invitation. So again, in this parable when the king has the man bound and thrown out of the celebration, it is after yet another offer of grace has been rejected that judgment is made. Despite its appearance as an “ugly” parable, this parable is again the bearer of a message of good news: first: all are given the invitation to come as you are, although you are expected to change...to put on the wedding attire showing you have accepted the teachings of Christ. Next, grace is always offered before judgment is made. And grace is offered again and again, even to those who have rejected it. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.