

PUT ON YOUR PARTY CLOTHES

For all the moderate, caring mainline Protestant Christians in attendance—which I would guess is pretty much all of us—this morning’s parable of the wedding banquet is for your listening pleasure and enjoyment.

Not!

Oh, the story starts off on a very upbeat note, and at first we don’t have much of a problem with it. A king sends out invitations to a great banquet he’s putting on; but the first invitees, who were most likely friends and associates of the king giving the banquet, are no-shows. Their calendars were full, there was too much work to be done, they didn’t want to miss their favorite TV show, or maybe they were just so full of themselves that they had no desire to attend.

The king didn’t take this rejection very well, especially when some of the RSVPs included brutalizing and even killing the king’s servants, who were just blameless messengers told by their boss to hand-deliver his party invitations.

“Fine,” the king said. “You want violence, I’ll show you violence.” And he sent off his soldiers with instructions to kill the murderers and burn down their city; which probably resulted in the deaths of some innocent men, women and children. Perhaps we can overlook the “collateral damage” the king’s action caused and make a case that, in some uncharacteristic way, justice was served.

Or maybe you think the king’s response was a little excessive, and maybe he should find a good therapist or look into taking an anger management class.

Anyway, the king said to his surviving servants, “Well, since I’ve already paid the caterer and the DJ has his sound equipment all set up, go out again. Only this time bring in the maimed, the blind and the lame and let them come to the party. The other people I invited aren’t worthy of my generosity.”

That’s the part of the parable we focus on and hold onto, isn’t it? Because we moderate, caring mainline Protestant Christians believe God is moderate and caring like us, not to mention loving, inviting, generous and merciful. So it’s nice when our understanding of God is affirmed by hearing a story from Jesus about God showing compassion to the marginalized, the poor and the homeless.

So, let's stop right here and savor that pleasant thought for a moment, shall we? [Pause]

Okay. Now, if we keep on reading, we discover to our shock that that's not the whole story. And the real ending isn't what we would consider pleasant or comforting. It would have been a much nicer parable if Jesus had stopped with God's graciousness and generosity being shown to the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame.

But Jesus didn't stop there. And, as Paul Harvey used to say, "Here's the rest of the story": unexpectedly, like a kindly, gentle Dr. Jekyll drinking his magic potion and transforming into a vicious and violent Mr. Hyde, the king suddenly turned on one of his guests.

Why? Because the unfortunate fellow didn't follow the dress code. He wasn't wearing the correct and acceptable outfit for the feast. So, the thing that stands out in this story isn't the graciousness and generosity of the king; it's the king's harsh, totally over the top judgment of a destitute, seemingly innocent man.

"You there, where's your tux?"

"Well, your Majesty, if you remember, I was homeless and living on the street just an hour ago, before I got your invitation. I don't own a tux."

That sounds like a logical and acceptable reason for not getting dressed up, doesn't it? But the thing is, back in Jesus' day when a king or other powerful person put on a big shindig, the party clothes were provided for the guests as they walked through the door, to ensure that everyone looked like they belonged there. I guess appearances were important. So, being poor and homeless didn't qualify as a legitimate excuse for entering the banquet room dressed like it was Casual Friday at work. In that sense, the king had a legitimate beef.

"I provided an outfit for you when you came in the door. All you had to do was put it on."

The poor man was speechless, but I bet he had a lot of thoughts running through his mind: "But, the clothes he gave me didn't really fit right. The pants were baggy in the butt, they made me look fat, the shirt was bulky and sort of uncomfortable, and . . . well, honestly, I didn't think it was all that important for me to wear it."

Whatever excuse or explanation the man at the table wanted to tell the king, the deed was done and the king gave his ruling. "Get this poor excuse for a guest out of my house immediately! Tie him up! Throw him into the pit of doom, where he can sit in the darkness and scream and cry all he wants and no one will hear him! Then maybe the next time I invite him to a banquet he'll

know that wearing my party clothes is required.”

Wow! That’s quite a disturbing ending to Jesus’ parable. He may love the little children, but God forbid they grow up and get an invitation from the king to attend one of his parties! If they do, they might want to order a book of etiquette on Amazon.com and read it carefully.

I have my own desired ending to this parable of Jesus. I want the king to say to the destitute guy who was pulled in off the street for a feast and was suddenly dragged away to the torture chamber for wearing the wrong clothes, “No problem. I don’t expect you to know the dress code in my palace. Don’t worry about it. Just help yourself to some roast beef and potatoes.”

But this king? “Take him away. Throw him into the darkness and let him rot!”

Why would Jesus tell this story about a bipolar monarch who invites some poor street people to a celebration and then goes ballistic when the party plans don’t go his way? Why did the king, who represents our God of love, have such a furious reaction to one of his guests for the minor infraction of not putting on an acceptable garment?

Maybe the author William Willimon can help us understand, at least a little bit, with this experience he had in college. He wrote: Back when I was in college there were no cellphones. If you wanted to call someone or receive a call, you had to use the phone at the end of the hall. I thought that was great because my room was at the end of the hall, and I could listen in on everyone’s conversations!

One evening I overheard a student who was clearly having a conversation with his mother. And I could surmise that his mother was giving him a fit about his semester grades, which weren’t great. He was giving her the old, “Yes, Mom, but that professor didn’t like me,” and, “I didn’t have a lot of interest in the class subject” sort of stuff.

When his painful and uncomfortable conversation ended he staggered into my room and dropped down on the sofa, exhausted. My student heart went out to him. “Sometimes it’s hard to get your parents to understand, isn’t it?” I said in an attempt to offer him some comfort.

He startled me when he said, “I can sort of understand her anger. He explained, “My mother has invested a lot in me. Right now she’s working two jobs to pay for my college tuition. She called me from the office that she cleans at night. So I guess she has a right to be upset with me.”

Maybe what Willimon’s story tells us, and helps to explain about Jesus’ parable of the Wedding Banquet, is that refusing God’s invitation is a serious matter. Keep in mind, when Jesus was telling this parable, he was about to pay

for the most costly party ever given. He was on his way to the cross. And many of the people around him refuse to put on their party clothes. Instead they responded with excuses, refusal, and rejection.

Might that not be a legitimate justification for divine anger?

This morning, we had a little party of our own, compliments of the Lord. We celebrated the baptism of little Charles Schleicher. The water he was sprinkled with was his way of getting ready for the eternal banquet feast God has prepared for him, and for all of us. It's nice, and I think it's important social etiquette, to look one's best and act appropriately when going to a party. Especially when God is the host.

Whenever I'm invited to any party—not that I'm invited to parties very often—but whenever someone is kind enough to invite me to some celebration, I feel a need to get ready for it. I shower up. I make sure I'm shaved. I make sure my teeth are brushed, my underarms are deodorized, and my breath is nice smelling.

And that's for a party thrown by someone who isn't God.

From everything Jesus said and the parables he told, God loves parties. And everyone is invited. You, me, Charles and his entire family, everybody! Isn't that great? But God has certain expectations for God's party guests. And one of them is to put on the party clothes we've been given through our baptisms. And those "party clothes" we Christians wear are the spiritual fruits of love, joy peace, mercy, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

A simpler way to put it is that when we're baptized we "put on Christ" by living a Christ-like life, filled with the spiritual fruits I just listed.

Newly baptized Charles Schleicher has just received his party invitation from the Lord. Right now he's a little too young to know what it means to put on Christ and strive to live a Christ-like life.

Right now his parents, Rachel and Tyler, and his Godparents, Megan, Emily, Andrew and Colin, are responsible for raising Charles in such a way that he will come to know what that means, by the way they live their own lives and by introducing him to a community of believers like us who have also been baptized and put on Christ and are striving to live a Christ-like life. And eventually, as Charles grows older and more mature, he will come to do those things for himself.

I feel very sad for the poor guy in Jesus' parable who was invited to God's banquet feast and got tossed out. He had everything he needed to remain a guest of God. He had received his invitation. And he was handed the acceptable clothes as he walked through the door. All he had to bring was

himself. And all he had to do was put on those clothes he had in his hands. For whatever reason, the guy refused to do it, and it made the king very unhappy.

We have our invitations, too: the invitation of that came with our baptisms. And we even have the appropriate outfits to wear. We're to dress ourselves in Christ, by living a Christ-like life filled with the spiritual fruits of love, joy peace, mercy, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So let's put our party clothes on because we have a celebration to get to, and God is awaiting our arrival. Amen.