

“Many are called, but few are chosen.” This is the summation of The Wedding Banquet, one of four allegorical parables strung together in Matthew illustrating the rejection of Israel’s religious leadership and warning against self-righteous arrogance. (HarperCollins Study Bible, p.1704) It is both invitation and warning.

Matthew tacked on this concluding logion (or saying) to emphasize a point that may well be lost on us hearing it outside of its original context. Why is that? Because an allegory has meaning outside of its meaning, understood only by those who would get it at the time. Sounds kind of like secret code doesn’t it?

Allegory can be conveyed through a variety of mediums whether artistic, theatrical, musical, or literary. Through a figurative or concrete story, the “characters and events are symbols that stand for ideas about human life or for a political or historical situation.” (merriam-webster.com)

The historical reality that Matthew’s listeners could not fail to hear was the horrific destruction of the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem, 70 ad. The graphic violence heard in the Wedding banquet is likely drawing upon the events still raw in the minds and hearts of the Jewish faith community. Why would Matthew impose yet another layer of interpretation onto this tragic story? Is it a turning point? an invitation? a warning? All of the above?

Luke’s Parable of the Great Dinner leaves out the violence and the details vary, but there’s no denying that both address the problem of election and reconsideration of it in light of Jesus’ ministry. God’s people were in tension, clashing against one another, as followers of Jesus and traditional Jewish adherents, particularly the leadership struggled with differing views. I find it fascinating that this lectionary coincides with political conflict and struggle of differing views at election time!

It is the human tendency to point the finger away from oneself in blame for what has happened and to point the finger towards oneself as leading followers along the superior path. There’s no doubt about the polemical tone of the parable. But on the other hand, don’t we believe it possible, for God’s purpose to arise out of the smoldering ruins?

After the destruction is wrought, the wedding is still on. Who is invited? EVERYONE! That is... after initial recipients reject the rsvp or excuses are lodged. The slaves or servants (aka prophets) are to gather anyone and everyone, the good and the bad, until the wedding hall is chock o’blocko full!

Before we start pointing the finger towards or away, and lest we Christians become too comfortable admiring ourselves as God’s chosen; we remember that we are called together by Jesus; who responding to the critics’ question, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mk 2:16-17) said, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

We dine at God’s table, feeding on Jesus in our hearts by faith because we acknowledge that we need God’s grace to heal our sin, sin being that which separates us from God.

Is. 25:1-9 Ps. 23! Phillipians 4:1-9 Matthew 22:1-14

During the 4th century when heresies were being fought out and battled through The Creeds, our Patristic fathers sought to understand the nature of the Church. What is 'The Church'?

There are entire books devoted to that question so we won't take that on in one sermon! But looking through one traditional lens where the Church is regarded as the bride of Christ; St. Gregory Nazianzen declared, "she has a body and soul, a visible and invisible element." (The Teachings of the Church Fathers, 2002, p. 28)

As a sacramental community of faith; we believe in God (invisible) made flesh in Jesus (visible), God incarnate. Then this must hold true for 'the Church'. St. Augustine expanded this idea of 'the Church visible & invisible' by reframing "the Church on earth as good and bad mixed together." (Thomas & Wondra, Introduction to Theology, 2002, p. 261)

This was radical! But not heretical; against the Donatists (purists) who "held the rigorist view that the church is a society of actual saints and that the validity of the sacraments depends on the worthiness of the minister". I'll confess that I'd rather not have that burden laid on me! I'm with Augustine on this one!

Are we hearing the invitation of the Wedding banquet? For the health of the Church, a People of God gathered, the priesthood of all believers, it behooves us to recognize that we are a mixed-economy invited – elected, not because of anything special or precious about us but precisely because all people and sentient beings are special and precious in God's eyes. And God selfishly wants us to 'fill the room', because God's love cannot be contained within it!

Henri Nouwen, a great spiritual writer of our day, describes chosenness: "To be chosen does not mean that others are rejected. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness." (Life of the Beloved – Spiritual Living in a Secular World, 1992, p.54-55)

Nadia Bolz-Webber, author of *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* is the founding pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints, an ELCA mission church in Denver. I find it liberating and comforting to know that in church we are in good company, that among us and within each of us resides both sinner and saint. Good and Bad. We are freed from pointing the finger toward self or other.

God invites all sinners and saints to come join the feast! The Earth tilted on its axis when God was born among us! In God's alternative banquet hall, both good and bad, stand shoulder to shoulder, 6 ft. apart and masked of course! But into the midst of this great reception, Matthew lobs a warning shot.

One guest is singled out by the king. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? And the so-called friend was speechless." (Mt 22:12) At first, the grim, harsh punishment seemingly outweighs the crime. The unfortunate, under-dressed partygoer is tossed into "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (v.13)

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But hold on a blessed minute! How could it be his fault that he lacks ‘the wedding robe’? Wasn’t this ‘friend’ invited in by the king’s servants? Maybe not. Maybe this so-called friend had snuck in, with ulterior motives? Think of crafty Satan, Lucifer ‘angel of light’ fallen from God.

And what is this ‘wedding robe’? Theories abound, as you no doubt might guess. Is it a tunic of humility and hospitality that Luke suggests? Is it the outward and visible intention of the heart? I suggest that the robe is woven of love. Love is the garment. It matters what you wear. Believers are urged to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Christ is the armor of love. (Gal 3:27, Ro. 13:14)

St. Paul writes, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.” (Col. 3:12-15)

Love is the robe that binds us together. One body, all people. But I don’t think Satan is welcome... it’s not possible to dwell in heaven, clothed in a garment of hate. But for the good and the bad, the saint and the sinner- Love is the invitation and the warning. Come join the feast. Don’t forget your robe. Amma Susan+