

DO YOU HAVE YOUR ROBE ON?
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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To engage with and study the New Testament in a deep and sustained way, as we seek to do in our life together as Christians, is to encounter a long, complex, and often painful story. It is a story that involves a Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, who came to be understood over several decades as God's own Son. It is a story that was embraced first by Jesus' own followers during his lifetime, all Jews themselves; then by Jews throughout Palestine and the rest of the Græco-Roman world; and eventually by Gentiles as well. Alongside those who became followers of Jesus were other God-fearing and faithful people who did not become followers. Especially within Judaism, this often resulted in families and synagogues divided between those who embraced the Gospel and those who did not. For a very long time, they worshipped together, followed the Jewish Law and calendar together, and strove to be one people together. Paul's ministry was organized around presenting the Gospel not as a replacement of Judaism but an expansion of it. But human beings being who we are, communities divided over belief in Jesus were ultimately unable to stay united. Over time, at different rates and to different degrees, Jewish communities broke apart; synagogues and churches became separate entities. It is not hard to imagine how sad and traumatic this was for everyone involved.

The Gospel of Matthew emerged from and reflects the story I've just recounted. This Gospel was written around 90 A.D. by a Jewish Christian who wrote excellent Greek and had a profound knowledge of Hebrew Scripture and Jewish Law. There is substantial evidence that he was writing in Antioch within a mostly Gentile church that had been originally a mostly Jewish community of Jesus followers. The writer of Matthew and his community may actually have been expelled from their original synagogue community, and it was probably the leaders of that original community, not the larger congregation, who were responsible for the expulsion. Remember, schisms like this were extraordinarily painful; folks worked hard to hold things together. This background helps us to see why Matthew's version of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet contains its special details and nuances, which make it a very different story than Luke's version of the parable (Luke 14:15-24).

Only Matthew's feast is a wedding feast; Luke's is just "a great dinner." Only Matthew's host is a king; Luke's is just "someone." Matthew's round-up of guests includes "all whom they found, both good and bad"; Luke's guests are "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And only Matthew has the story of an expulsion: the expulsion of the man who was not wearing a wedding robe. So, while the broad contours of the story are the same in both Gospels (several rounds of invited guests refuse to come, after which the hall is filled with uninvited guests who are rounded up on the streets), the details result in stories with entirely different points. Luke's Jesus expresses the priority given to the poor and to the differently abled. But Matthew's Jesus in our story today divides the guests into the good and the bad and finds at least one who is not worthy to stay. It's a story of who's in and who's out. The echo of Matthew's community's story is here: the story of invited guests (the original community) who refuse Jesus the King's invitation; and then of a larger community, like the one that eventually formed, of Jewish and Gentile Christians, who single out for their wrath the leaders who expelled the original Jesus followers and here, in this story, expel *them*. The man without his wedding robe, whom the king still addresses as "friend," represents these leaders. Having expelled the Jesus followers, they are no longer welcome in the new community.

It's a much harder story to digest than Luke's version. But the New Testament challenges us to find God's Word in difficult stories as well as in pleasant ones. As always, the best way for us to do so is to find ourselves in the story. Matthew's community was one that could not go forward unless it accepted that some cherished relationships would have to end. Those who refused to put on their robes – to put on Christ, if you will – had to be left behind.

The real challenge of the story for us today is that it asks each of us, if we dare to let it, to turn the mirror around onto ourselves and ask, "Do we have our wedding robes on? Have we put on Christ?" And if we ask this question, we may use Luke's version of the story to help us to answer the question. The Church today cannot go forward until it confronts what Luke's Jesus asks us to confront: all the ways in which the Church has been complicit in excluding the poor and the oppressed, the differently abled, people of color, the LGBTQ community. Luke's Jesus tells us that to put our wedding robes on means to stop being complicit in these exclusions. Matthew's Jesus says that without putting on these robes we are no longer being the Church.

So, we need both versions of the story to really hear God's Word for us today. Taken together, they are perhaps even more challenging than they are on their own. But perhaps Matthew's version becomes a bit less harsh. The Church is always needing to change in order to be the Body of Christ in the present. Matthew's Jesus just wants us to make sure we're dressed for the wedding that's going on now, not trapped in clothes that no longer suit the occasion.

Do you have your wedding robe on?