

What are you doing here?

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on October 12, 2008, the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable...think about these things. Philippians 4:8

One of the most inane and annoying ways to greet someone is to ask, "What are you doing here?" It may be said with innocent good intent, but I find it off-putting because it implies that I don't belong there. It is this very question we find in today's parable of the wedding guest.

The king invites everyone to the wedding of his son and when everything is prepared he orders his servants to summon those on the guest list. Sadly, no one responds to the invitation. They are too busy with other concerns and rudely ignore the invitation. The servants then go out to invite others, both deserving and undeserving, to fill the wedding hall. When the king comes in to greet them, one of the guests is dressed casually and lacking a proper wedding garment. In front of everyone, the King asks, "What are you doing here? How did you get in without a wedding robe?" The man is dumbfounded. The poor soul is speechless! He is immediately given the bum's rush and is thrown out of the banquet hall. The king is offended that his invitation is taken so casually that he has the man banished.

Now, to be sure, this parable isn't about clothes and what we wear to church. It has nothing to do with our outward appearance. Instead, it is about how we respond to God's call. It's all about our inner attitude and who we are on the inside. God is far more interested in the quality of our inner person than in our outward appearance or status.

This is a teaching story about how, despite the warnings by the prophets, the people of Israel did not respond to God's call to them. The invitation was then extended to the Gentile world who accepted the invitation, though there were those who accepted with a casual attitude, symbolized by the guest who showed up without a wedding robe. This hapless soul represents those who accept the invitation but aren't willing to make any change in their lives. They expect to go on just as they always have with no intention of making any changes. They presume the benefits of God's grace with no obligations. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to as "cheap grace," the expectation of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline and absolution without confession. The cost of discipleship is to give ourselves for the sake of Christ as he gave himself for us.

If we want forgiveness and reconciliation we must lay aside the stained and ragged garments of sin, hypocrisy, and selfishness and put on the new garments of sincerity and truth. To enter God's realm, we must be ready to examine our lives and make a sincere effort to implement the necessary changes to turn our lives around. We can't assume a guaranteed place in the realm of God just because we are baptized and confirmed, or because we went to church when we were growing up, or because someone in our family was an active member of the church. Our relationship with God cannot be on the merits of others; it must be on our own.

Living the Christian life is all about what we do after we say, "I believe," "I accept," and "I promise." Taking our faith seriously means assuming responsibility for the demands of the gospel and not expecting it to be watered down and tailored for convenience and expediency. While the invitation is open to all, we are not to presume on it because not all are accepted.

If you find yourself unable or unwilling to get out of the old familiar patterns of being intolerant of others, making false claims about yourself and others or having misplaced values, you can make the necessary changes. We are by nature ambivalent about change. We tend to stay with what is familiar and retain old habits, even though we know they are unhealthy and unproductive. We resist change and prefer old familiar patterns of behavior. Change requires inner transformation. Our current financial crisis is due largely to old habits of greed and excess. Such compulsive behavior can be changed even if it means having to reach rock bottom before admitting the need for it.

The garment in this parable is the cloth of preparedness. It is about being prepared and ready to accept the invitation at any time. The garment of old attitudes and habits is exchanged for the new garment of salvation. This new clothing brings out the best in others by expecting nothing less than the best in ourselves. God's unconditional love for each and every one of us begins with being accepted as we are but with the expectation that we will grow into being better people. It comes with the expectation that we are willing to adopt a new and better attitude and perspective about how we live. The garment of salvation is cut from the cloth of a new attitude and a new perspective. It means treating others with the same respect we would want for ourselves.

When we take charge of our life, the first step is to realize that we are not the center of the universe. We all have to learn to respect the needs and rights of others and to consider their needs over our own. The next step in becoming our own master is no longer allowing ourselves to be victimized by old ways and habits. Anything less will get us nowhere. The third step in taking charge of our life is not allowing ourselves to be possessed by our possessions and compulsions. We have to learn that instead of wanting what we don't have, it is far better to be content with what we do have.

A final step is getting beyond expecting our Sunday morning worship to be a "drive through" experience. Worship must have more substance than a spiritual burger and fries at the drive up window! What we are offering in our worship is our very best as our gift back to God for all that we have received. We offer whatever is true, honorable, just, pure and commendable to God. We must be clothed with our best spiritual garments when we partake at the banquet table of God. Here is where we rejoice in the Lord always. And again, we say, rejoice!