

October 12, 2014 18th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 22:1-14

It is said that you learn something every day. I recently learned something from a military chaplain about changing protocols for funerals of veterans. When you die and you have your funeral here at church if you are in a coffin the coffin is draped with a pall. I have our pall hanging here. The pall is a great equalizer. It doesn't matter whether you are in a mahogany coffin inlaid with gold, or a big cardboard box you somebody picked up at Aldi, it gets the same cover. Rich or poor, respected or despised they all look the same when they come in for a funeral.

If you are cremated and your ashes are here we do something similar. Instead of using the pall for the coffin we use one of the communion palls and put a veil over it. Again, a great equalizer. I've never had a fight over a coffin but I have had fights over urns with ashes. People want to show off the fancy urn. That's fine, but not in worship.

There has always been one and only one exception to the use of a pall and that is for veterans. Veterans can have an

American flag draped over their coffin instead of the pall. It is the church's acknowledgment of the person's act of service. Plus the flag can also be a great equalizer - from a private to a general they all get the same flag.

What I recently learned, however, is that some army chaplains are now discouraging the act of draping a coffin with a flag and instead recommend using the church's pall. A flag can be put on at the graveside, but not in the church. The logic being that the church's funeral pall represents a higher order of authority than the United States government.

Now I don't plan on shoving this emerging protocol down anyone's throat. The only thing I'll insist on is that a pall or flag or some great equalizer be over the coffin. We'll break that rule over my dead body. Oh, wait. No, not over my dead body either!

The interesting thing about a pall is that it's not black. Palls are almost always white, and like ours they may have some design embroidered on them. Palls are usually bright, vivid and

lively. Ours is filled with symbols of baptism and communion. Palls are ironic in that they are party clothes for a casket.

That brings us to the very strange parable Jesus teaches in our gospel reading, especially the end where the guy gets chucked out of the party for not wearing party clothes. I always imagine this scene as some messenger from the king out on the street inviting some homeless guy to the party and the guy says, "Wait, I'm not properly dressed. Let me slip my tux on first." How absurd!

The whole parable plays on absurdity. Does this king really get so mad because his subjects won't come to a party? I can imagine him calling his wife and saying, "I'm going to be a bit late for the dinner party. Keep the soup warm. I've got three more nations to conquer yet this afternoon."

We have to remember that this parable is an allegory, and it is also the third in a set of three parables. The first parable is the one about the father who sends his two sons to work in the field. One says he'll go but doesn't. The second says he won't go but does. That one is meant to criticize the

lip service Jewish leaders were giving to righteousness but not really living it.

The second parable is the one of the vineyard that we had last week. The owner threw out and killed the tenants because they wouldn't pay the rent. Then the owner found new tenants. That one was an allegory for God rejecting the people of Israel and embracing the church. You may remember that I preached that just because the church is now "in" that doesn't mean it can't be chucked out too.

That leads us to this parable. Again, the original guests, representing Jewish religious leaders, refuse to come and they are destroyed. The second guests, presumably Christians, are gathered from everywhere and sit down to eat.

But one of these guests isn't wearing a wedding robe. He gets chucked out, and the image Jesus uses is judgment imagery that the biblical writers use to refer to God's ultimate judgment. But again, how can a person invited at the last minute have the proper clothing? They can't.

Some interpreters have suggested that in those days new wedding robes were given to all the guests upon their arrival. This guy then refused to put it on. That is probably an historically inaccurate interpretation. Wealthy people would want to show off their party clothes, not put on some standard garment from the host. However, the early church does appear to have the practice of dressing a person in a new garment when he or she was baptized. If that's the case, then the parable would refer to someone who was baptized. Then later figuratively took off the garment by living in a way that was not in keeping with their baptism. In other words, they were exploiting grace by being at the party but not living like it. The parable shows that God is not to be mocked and the consequences are to be chucked out. This is probably the true intention of the parable. It comes to us as a warning.

Have you ever given something as a gift and they didn't seem all that interested in it? Perhaps you worked hard and made sacrifices and you imagined the joy in the person when it was received. However, they just set it aside as if it was nothing. Or, perhaps you gave something at a party or a shower but someone else's gift way outshone your own. You feel hurt.

This social injury is probably a bit of the way God feels when people accept his gift of grace with a sense of entitlement. As if they were saying to God, "Well, you should die for me. After all, I deserve it!"

That's not God's intention. Just because God's favor comes to us as a gift that doesn't mean we can be lazy. God's gift should drive us to action: giving, sharing, spreading the news of God's party.

As I say this in seriousness, I want to give a word of caution. I have a neighbor who believes that God forgives all sins - anything and everything - up to the point of being baptized. Then however, all sins count against you. God will hold you accountable for them because you're now an insider and you should know better.

That is not the intention of this parable. Each and every day you are simultaneously a saint and a sinner - both faithfully sharing God's goodness in your life and being trapped in a world of sin. If you were expected to be perfect we wouldn't have confession and forgiveness in worship.

No, live boldly and joyfully. God has invited you and everyone to a great and everlasting celebration. Yes, mistakes happen. You even sin deliberately too. But God still forgives those who seek and long for a place at the party.

Discard the old clothes of hatred, jealousy, and self-righteousness ... as we quit thinking we have to earn the ticket to the meal but willingly accept the banquet that has been prepared ... we are given a new wardrobe. We are dressed in Christ. We put on compassion, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and love. Amen