

28TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - A – 2005
“That garment”

I know what’s bothering you. It’s the garment, isn’t it? That’s the part of this parable that upsets us. Why in the world did the king kick the poor guy out just because he wasn’t dressed to the nines? After all, he was probably a street person. Well, for the answer, stay tuned. We’ll get to that later. First, a word from our sponsor.

Are you tired of dieting? Going to Weight Watchers? Of drinking Slim Fast? Of counting calories? Do you wish Jenny Craig had never been born? Do you miss carbs? Rich, creamy desserts? Well, have I got a deal for you, straight from the mouth of Isaiah the prophet. If you live a good life, and follow the a few simple rules, Ten to be exact, that, for the most part, have nothing to do with food, you can feast on rich foods and choice wines all you want; juicy, rich foods and pure, choice wines. And even more, you will be welcomed to a wedding banquet that will go on forever. Not just any wedding banquet, but a royal wedding banquet thrown for the King’s son! Apparently, there is no word for “diet” in heaven. How could you say no?

Now back to our story. Sorry, we can’t start with the guy with white socks at a black sock affair. Isaiah was speaking poetically and Jesus was speaking in allegory. As the gospel story unfolds, we see that the tenant farmers (really the religious leaders), reject the prophets and Jesus. So God sends out his messengers (the disciples of Jesus) to invite everyone to the banquet, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors. It doesn’t matter. God would not let the banquet go to waste. The moral is clear: God’s love extends to all. God’s love is all-embrasive. God’s love excludes no one.

We hear this and nod yes, but inside we're not so sure we really believe it. Most of us have been raised believing we have to earn God's love. If we do "good," God will love us. But this parable reveals the exact opposite. If we let God love us, we will do good. Also, in this parable, Matthew presents his very realistic view of the Church. He sees it as less than perfect. It is made up of the good, the bad and the ugly. It is made up of people like us. We are all over the lot. There is no litmus test to be invited into God's world.

I was invited to a Federal Way ministerial meeting a couple of years ago. It was sponsored by an evangelical group. A few days later, I got a questionnaire to fill out. If I answered "yes" to each question, I would be allowed to attend the meeting. *Do I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior?* I could answer "yes" to that, even though that isn't the way we Catholics talk. Then they asked, *"Do you believe that only those who make a personal act of faith in Jesus can be saved?"* They had me. Babies who die can't make a personal act of faith in Jesus, but I believe they are in heaven; so great is God's loving mercy. Besides, Moses and King David never heard of Jesus, but I'd hate to think they didn't make it to the heavenly banquet. Finally, they asked, *Are you a committed Christian, free of sin and accept the bible alone as the guide to faith.* I missed two out of three on that one. Needless to say, I didn't go to the meeting. The invitation had been withdrawn before I ever accepted it. Of course, I was heart broken. (Fr. Kevin from St. Theresa's said the Cardinal of London once said, *"God is present everywhere, but less present at meetings."*)

Remember the parable of the weeds and the wheat? We want to pull out the weeds from the garden of the church. Jesus said let them grow together. Remember how he said, *"The rain falls on the just and the unjust"*

alike.” God’s love, God’s grace, is showered down on everyone, in the Church and outside the Church; believers and non-believers alike. God invites everyone to his heavenly banquet.

Sometimes I try to warn the people in the RCIA program, who are preparing to become Catholic, that we are far from perfect as a church; that we will let them down. That I will, you will, the bishop will. But I also try to tell them that we will, also, struggle to live the gospel with them, to pick them up when they fall, and how we are counting on them to pick us up when we fall. If we cannot embrace each other in our brokenness, there is no one on this earth we can embrace. And we will be very much alone.

Now, about the guy with the white socks! He gets tossed out on his ear. It doesn’t sound very inclusive to me. What’s going on? Apparently, it was the custom for the host to supply a festive garment to any wedding guest who didn’t have one. We assume the other street people put on the festive garment, this guy didn’t. What he represents in the story are those who accept the invitation to the banquet, but then don’t cooperate with the host. While it didn’t matter to the guest what he wore, it did matter to his host.

While Matthew invites the good the bad and the ugly to the banquet, here he singles out the complacent, those who take what is offered to them for granted. Jesus didn’t die on the cross just so we could feel good about ourselves and our being saved. The Christian community exists to continue Jesus’ work, to bring the kingdom of God to earth. It is about making the love of Jesus real in the world, even here in Federal Way. In just two chapters later, Matthew will tell the parable of the sheep and the goats. At issue is whether or not we feed the hungry, cloth the naked, or visit the imprisoned. That’s where we hear those telling words of Jesus, *“If you did it to one of the least of my brothers/sisters, you did it to me.”* If we let God

love us, it will transform us into the likeness of his son. If we don't, we will be concerned only with ourselves.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul put it this way, "*We are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ*"(13:14). And to the Colossians, "*As God's holy ones, clothe yourselves in heartfelt mercy, with kindness, meekness and patience. ... Over all these put on love*" (3:12-14). The wedding garment, then, is the reminder to Christian believers that Jesus calls us to a Way of Life. Only if we wear such a garment can we be instruments of God's peace to our world.

This Mass gives us a foretaste of the eternal banquet Jesus speaks of. Jesus is our Host. He lays before us the rich food and the choice wine of his word and sacrament. But that's not all. He says, "*Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!*" At the end of Mass, he commissions us to continue his work, to tell others of his love and desire for unity among all peoples. If we eat and run, we miss this critical commissioning to work for justice and to express Jesus' compassion to our hurting world. Today, he chooses us to go out and invite more people to his banquet. It is ready. We shouldn't be afraid. If St. Paul can say, "*I can do all things in him who strengthens me,*" we should be able to do this.