

Sermon for Sunday, October 15, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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There are two kinds of parties
as far as I can tell.

The first one is the kind
where everyone dresses up to the hilt.

The newspapers are there,
the photographers from People magazine.

And you spend most of your time walking around
checking out

what everyone else
is wearing:

who is in fashion, who is not, who is wearing something new, and who has recycled
from last season, or, worse still,
last week.

What matters most
is to be seen, and to be seen
sparkling with beauty, jewelry, and wit.

And then there are the other type of parties. The ones where no one really cares what you
wear, where people are more likely to show up in jeans and a t-shirt
than a designer dress,
where you spend your time eating and drinking and laughing, and where
what matters most
is not
you wear on the outside
but who you are
on the inside.

When Jesus begins his story about the wedding feast
all our past experience
would make us expect it to be like
the first kind of party.

A king
is giving this wedding banquet. It's a royal, state
occasion, and no expense
will be spared.

Invitations, we expect,
would be limited to the royal, the wealthy, the elite,
and once received
would be guarded like gold.

Those invited
would order new, custom-designed, outfits from the greatest names in the fashion world,
and journalists would wait eagerly for tip-offs on who would wear what.

The wedding
would be the party
of the year, perhaps even the decade,
and to refuse an invitation
would be not only rude
but stupid!

But that's not how it goes
in the story Jesus tells.

There are no designer gowns, no journalists waiting.
In fact, everyone who is invited
turns their invitation down.
No one shows.

The king tries again. He sends out his slaves,
and repeats his invitations.
But again, they all
turn him down.
they are too busy, with farms to run, business to do.
The king is offering them a feast, the party to outdo all parties,
and they
can't be bothered.

And so, as Jesus tells the story,
the king decides to try something different.
He sends his servants out again,
this time, not to the wealthy, then royal, the famous,
this time
to the ordinary people
going about their ordinary lives.
This time
it is they who are invited, they who are welcomed

to the feast. Whether they have the right connections, whether they have the right clothes, whether they have the right money - none of that matters, none of that is relevant.

Good and bad alike, all that is important is whether they will agree to come to the feast.

This wedding feast begins like the first kind of party, and ends up like the second.

There is a tendency for us to think the church is like the first kind of party. Not so much in terms of what you wear, although it used to be that no one would dare enter church - especially a venerable old building like this one - unless they were wearing their very best clothes, for men, a coat and tie, and for women an elegant hat, and woe betide if you couldn't afford shoes. But the exclusiveness was not just in terms of clothing. We've got over the clothing thing, more or less, but there's still a tendency for us to think that to belong to the church, you have to reach some sort of minimum standards. You have to know certain things, believe certain things, do certain things. Knowingly or unknowingly we build barriers around our church so that only some people come in.

And that's the exact reverse of Jesus' wedding feast. There, anyone and everyone was invited in. It didn't matter if you had the clothes, it didn't matter if you spoke the right way,

it didn't matter
if you were good or bad.

Everyone was invited, everyone
was welcome.

And that, Jesus is saying
is what God's church is, or at least should be, like.
A place where the doors are open, a place where there are no barriers,
a place where anyone
and everyone
can belong.

And there are two places
where we see it most of all, and where we try to make it clear
that all are welcome.

The first
is at the great feast of the church, the Eucharist.
Over the last two thousand years, the church
has had all sorts of different rules
about who is allowed to receive the holy food and drink.
Sometimes
it has been restricted to those who went through a long period of preparation.
At other times, it has been open to anyone.
In the Episcopal church, there used to be all sorts of rules
about who could receive the bread and wine. You had to be a certain age;
you had to have a certain understanding.
But more recently
we, and the church throughout the world, have begun to think more
about what the Eucharist is really all about. Is it primarily something
we do,
a human ceremony
to honor God?
Or is it more
about what God is doing
through these created things, bread and wine.
The consensus is,
that it is more about what God is doing. It is about God
being present with us, it is about God
filling us, it is about God

through our eating and drinking of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, giving us the gifts of forgiveness and faith which come through the death of Jesus.

What we do, we do in response.

We respond to the invitation of God

to eat and drink,

we respond as we receive God's presence and God's gifts.

It used to be that the church placed a huge emphasis

on being ready

for communion, on understanding

what was going on.

But when Jesus held the first Eucharist, the night before he died,

his disciples had no idea

what was happening. There was no way that they could understand

what was going on.

And so the church has come to realize

that all our emphasis on understanding

has sometimes got in the way of people receiving the gifts

that God has to offer us.

Our children know how to eat. Our children

know how to feast. Our children

know how to enjoy the presence of the people who they love.

And our children know how to receive

what is given them

by those who they love.

And God invites them to the feast, along with us adults,

who understand - or at least think we do - what is going on.

God invites all of us to the feast, the meal of thanksgiving

which we call the Eucharist, old and young alike, male and female, rich and poor.

All God asks of us

is that we come, responding to the invitation,

and receive

what is on offer.

And the second place

we see God's radical invitation

is in baptism.

Baptism

is a free gift. It's not something we earn, it's not something we deserve. It's something we receive -
the gift of being forgiven,
the gift of God filling us,
the gift of belonging as full members of this community called the church.
There is nothing we can do
to earn it.

Anyone who wishes to receive the gift of baptism, to be counted as one of God's own special people, is welcome. This is God's party, and all are invited.

But there is a second side to it. You might have noticed that so far I've avoided talking about the second part of Jesus' story, the difficult part. When the king meets the man who is not wearing a wedding robe, and has him thrown out. It all seems a little peculiar. After all, the poor guest was dragged off the street with no warning, and so could hardly be expected to have come all dressed up. That's what you would think.

But the people who know about such things seem to think that in that culture, the king would have provided robes for all his guests. So what this one is doing, is effectively refusing his host's hospitality. He's not willing to join the festivities. He wants the free food, but won't have any part in the change that that involves - even if it's only his clothes.

And this is the second side to the Eucharist and Baptism. There are no conditions on the invitation. But joining the party will involve being changed. We do preparation, we ask you to make vows, I preach you sermons, not as a prerequisite, but so you know what you're getting into, so you know

what kind of party it is
that you are getting involved in.
It's a party
where you do have to change your clothes.
Not the sort of clothes
you buy at Penney's or Macy's,
 but the clothes of your character, the clothes
of your soul.

The sort of clothes we will wear at God's party
are, to quote the letter to the Colossians,
compassion and kindness,
humility and meekness,
patience and forgiveness,
and most of all,
love.

Those are the clothes
that will make the most glorious wedding gown.
And to put them on, in the words of our epistle reading today,
we are to think about these things. To fill our minds with what is true and honorable, and
just, what is pure, what is pleasing, what is commendable . . . to fill our minds with things
that are good, with things of God.

Joining the party, being part of God's family,
 Christ's body, the church
means being shaped and changed
to be more like Christ.
Not so we can get in the door,
but so
that at the height of the party,
 when we finally we meet the host,
we will not be embarrassed
but will be ready to meet
our God and our Savior.