

## *A Tale of Two Stories*

Matthew 22:1-14 The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, October 9, 2012  
*A Sermon to Launch the Trinity Annual Giving Campaign 2012*  
 Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland, Oregon

I am *so* delighted to be here. I once had the honor and privilege of serving with your Dean, Bill Lupfer, in Plymouth Michigan. Now I bring you greetings from ELCA Lutherans in Livonia Michigan, where I serve as pastor at Holy Cross Lutheran Church. Earlier this week I was in Rockford IL visiting my father, who is now in a nursing home with dementia, and my mother, who turned 85 last Sunday. On Wednesday night I was helping my mother sort through what she calls her “gimmes.” She receives countless numbers of letters in the mail every day asking for money. And she is overwhelmed. I was encouraging her to do one of two things: not respond to them and just recycle them, *or* return the response forms *in* their postage paid envelopes without committing to *anything*, and ask them to take her off their mailing lists.

But I speak with forked tongue today. You should have received a “gimme” letter recently from your Senior Warden, Jerry Petty. *Don't do that* with Jerry's letter! If letters of this genre were pearls, Jerry's letter would be the one pearl of great value: the pearl worth selling all the other pearls for. I was particularly moved and impressed by the story Jerry tells in that letter about a strand of pearls his sister-in-law wore on her wedding day. Jerry says “the bride's grandmother had brought those pearls with her when she escaped Nazi-occupied Warsaw. The grandmother, Sophia Pedersen, had carefully sewn this pearl necklace into the hem of her skirt. She was prepared to barter or sell it for safe passage, for food, or for new beginnings if she and her husband reached the United States. Imagine her joy,” Jerry writes, “when she was able to pass this treasure on to her only granddaughter on her wedding day.”

How wonderful to have such a *pearl* of a story about *another* wedding garment to *counter* the *disturbing* story about the wedding garment in our Gospel today. I'm not the only one speaking with forked tongue today. Jesus seems to be doing a pretty good job of it himself. And so is Trinity Cathedral -- open and welcoming congregation that you are. I read *this* in your worship folder, right there under the word, “Welcome:” “...as a tangible expression of *Jesus'* openness to *all*, Trinity ... Cathedral welcomes all persons regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic circumstance, or religious background to our worshiping community and Eucharist table.” OK, that's fabulous. But why then read this story from Matthew 22? (*I* didn't pick this story to preach on. I was all ready to go with the “Pearl of Great Price.”) On the one hand, today the king in this parable (as a “tangible expression of Jesus' openness to all”) invites anyone and everyone to this wedding banquet – the bad and the good. On the other hand, when he discovers that one of the wedding guests isn't *dressed* right, he throws him out. What's up with that? How can we expect someone who's just been dragged in off the street to be wearing the right clothes? Your deacon commented this morning that this sounds very Episcopalian. But I'm Lutheran. And *I* didn't bring *my* robe with me this weekend. (*I* didn't want to carry it on the plane.) Does this mean you should have thrown *me* out?

I wonder if this story disturbs us because we don't get the whole picture. We don't live in ancient Jewish culture. You see, it was custom in ancient Judaism for the host of the banquet to *provide* each guest with a wedding robe, the way you provided me with a robe to wear today. The robes were handed out *free of charge*. All the guest had to do was put it on and join the wedding feast. To refuse to put on the garment was an insult – a rejection of the gift, and all that the gift represented.<sup>i</sup>

Can you imagine Jerry's sister-in-law *refusing* to wear her grandmother's pearls for *her* wedding feast? Can you imagine her rejecting such a gift – and all that the gift represented? What kind of defiance could that *ever* be about? Wearing the pearl necklace was not simply a question of taste or preference or even duty or obligation. It wasn't *about* the *pearls*. It was about what the pearls represented. The pearls were the outward, visible sign. Wearing them was about claiming the story. Wearing them was about embracing grace: the experience, strength and hope that had come to define this family. Wearing the pearls was about letting that same grace define *her*. What if the wedding robe in our Gospel today is just such a gift? What if the wedding garment, not unlike the pearl necklace, tells a much bigger story, a defining story for the family of God? What if the wedding robe tells a story that changes everything because it changes *me*?

I know Oregon has Marcus Borg. I was really hoping to meet him this weekend, and thank him for changing my life with his books. But he's not here and I'm from Michigan and Michigan has the author Rob Bell. Rob Bell just wrote a book called Love Wins. I love what Bell says in this book about the story of *The Prodigal Son*. “There are two versions of this story,” Bell says. “*His* – meaning the prodigal son's version, and the father's version. When the father welcomes his wayward son home with a celebratory banquet, what the father does, in effect, is *retell* his older son's story. And the *prodigal* son has to choose which version of his story he will believe, which version he will trust, which version he will live in. “Hell,” says Bell, “is our refusal to trust *God's* retelling of our story.... What the gospel does is confront *our* version of our story with *God's* version of our story.” What if putting on the wedding robe is like being clothed with Christ in baptism? What if wearing the wedding robe signifies our willingness to claim *God's* retelling of our story? Like the garment of hope and promise we put on at baptism? Once we trust *God's* version of our story, we live differently, because we see differently. “We create hell,” Bell says, “whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story.”<sup>ii</sup>

If you are here today, I know *you* live in a *world* that speaks with a forked tongue. *Outside* these doors, you hear a story that tells you that *you* are the center of the universe. You live day in and day out in a world that *runs* on a story that tells you it's all about *you*, that your value comes from what you accumulate and acquire; your worth comes from the earning power you have that will enable you to accumulate even more. And that stuff you accumulate requires your energy and attention to secure, to maintain, and finally -- to discard. That story lodges in your soul, shapes your desires and agendas -- and makes you, frankly, anxious. You are continually afraid that you do not have enough, even though you feel bloated with "cumber," (as the Quakers call it). And at the same time you feel guilty about a standard of living well above that of the rest of the inhabited world.<sup>iii</sup> You will hear more about this story on Saturday from theologian Douglas Meeks, and then again later, with a different twist, from Richard Rohr. It is a story that leaves us, over time, not just overwhelmed, but exhausted and, ironically, empty -- because there is no end to the story of the pursuit of more. There is no rest, because there is never enough. But that is the story you hear, over and over again, outside these doors.

*Inside* these doors, emerging from this community, you hear another story. You hear *God's* version of your story. You hear of a God who claims you in the waters of baptism and meets you at the cross in suffering, pain, and death, who walks with you through death to the promise and power of resurrection, over and over again. You hear about a God who says, "There is nothing you can do to make me love you any more, and there is nothing you can do to make me love you any less."<sup>iv</sup> You hear the good news that this God is in you, so you are a precious *part* of the universe; but you also hear the truth: you are not its center.<sup>v</sup> That's what putting on the wedding robe is really about. Walking through these doors is like donning that garment of grace. It's like acknowledging your hunger for a different story. Somehow, you catch a glimpse of it here. Week in and week out, the liturgy places God at the center of the universe and all of you in community.<sup>vi</sup>

The contrast between the two stories - what you hear inside these walls compared with what you hear outside these walls - is not unlike two stories of a wedding banquet: one in heaven and one in hell. In hell, the people gather at a banquet table overflowing with an abundance of the finest food and wine imaginable, yet they are emaciated and sickly, their faces are sullen and drawn. You see, despite the abundance, they can't eat or drink because their elbows don't bend, and they're unable to bring their hands to their mouths to feed themselves. In heaven, the people can't bend their elbows either. But they are laughing and singing, feasting and satisfied -- because *they* feed each other. This is God's version of your story. This is the story you not only *tell* at Trinity Cathedral. This is the story you trust enough to *live* in. And it changes everything.

The last thing in the world God wants you to think -- about stewardship, or the annual giving campaign at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, is that it is all about reacting to one more *gimme* letter on your overwhelming list of things to do that includes adding to the cumber in your life. Or that responding is a matter of taste or preference, duty or obligation. Stewardship *begins* with putting on the garment of grace, and coming to the heavenly feast. It *begins* with embracing the experience, strength, and hope that has come to define this faith community. It begins with accepting, and trusting *God's* version of your story, and letting that grace define *you*. After all *that*, stewardship is about *every* choice you make in *every* area of your life *because* you live in *God's* story and not another.

Pastor Dana Runestad

Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church

30650 6 Mile Rd. | Livonia, MI 48152

<http://holycrosslivonia.org> | [pastordana@holycrosslivonia.org](mailto:pastordana@holycrosslivonia.org)

Office: 734.427.1414 | Mobile: 734.765.1141

<sup>i</sup> Since ancient times, interpreters have disagreed about the symbolism of the wedding garment (and they still do!). I choose to ere on the side of grace, and take full responsibility for my interpretation.

<sup>ii</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2011, pp. 164-175.

<sup>iii</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, "Household Economics" (Chapter 4) in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA, pp. 45-46

<sup>iv</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997.

<sup>v</sup> Joan Chittister, *Twelve Steps to Inner Freedom: Humility Revisited*, Benetvision, Erie, PA, 2003, p. 23.

<sup>vi</sup> John S. Mogabgab, quoted in Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, 2005, p. 60.