

Proper 23, Year A 2023
St. Clare's Episcopal Church
[Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14](#)
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When we do not put on the mantle of God's love in our lives, we too, look to golden calves to be our salvation.

Today's Gospel is going to take some untangling. It's harsh in many respects and a little bit confusing. But marriage was a very different arrangement in Jesus' day from our understanding of marriage as a loving relationship between two consenting people. Scholar Kenneth Stevenson, who was Bishop of Portsmouth, in England, summarized marriage in the patriarchal tradition of ancient Judaism in his book "To Join Together": marriage was first the negotiation of a contract, then betrothal, followed by consummation.

The marriage contract that was negotiated was essentially an agreement between two men, the father of the bride and the groom. Women were exchanged as property, with the goal of increasing wealth for families. In the time of Jesus, women were exchanged like plots of land and herds of cattle – just so much property which men owned.

The period of betrothal was not a time in which two people got to know each other better and grew closer in love – but a kind of "grace period" in which the groom could cancel the contract – for some justifiable cause, but without penalty. For example Joseph, when he was betrothed to Mary could have canceled the contract upon learning that she was pregnant, but chose not to.

In the first century, marriage usually happened when a young girl was between 11 and 13 years old, and the couple immediately began having children. Many children died in infancy, and most women died by the age of 30. Men, then, would remarry another young woman and continue to have children.

But the marriage ceremony as we know it did not exist until about the 12th century. During Jesus' time, a marriage feast was the culmination of the financial arrangement between the men, and an important social ritual. The marriage banquet sealed the relationship between the two families. It was a cultural ritual which eventually became part of the religious tradition. During Jesus' time, however, there doesn't seem to have been a religious rite for marriage. Marriage was a domestic and civil affair. The wedding feast was the public acclamation of the binding together of two families.

To understand the gospel lesson better, it helps to understand the mechanics of marriage. A man works out a financial arrangement with the father of a young girl and she is then sent to live with that man and his family. After a period of a year or so, the man – the groom – can decide if it will work or not, and, if he decides that it will, then he and the father announce a feast. Once the feast has been decided upon, messengers are sent out to invite people to the feast – today. Not much advance warning, no formal invitations or that sort of thing. Come now, put on your wedding garments and join us today.

Usually people stopped what they were doing, took off their every day clothes and put on a wedding robe. It was common to own two kinds of garments – work clothes and a

wedding robe, usually something white that was kept clean and at the ready. Normally everyone who was invited attended. Work was set aside immediately and the guests joined the feast, festive gatherings that could last a whole week or until the last calf was slaughtered and the last wine was drunk.

Thank goodness lots has changed since then. But how does today's gospel have much relevance for us today?

Attending a wedding feast meant that you were to wear a wedding garment. And in the parable when one of the guests does not, the king is offended. It is as great an offense, or maybe more so, than the guests who refused to attend. Some refused to participate at all and one refused to participate appropriately.

But this is a parable. We've talked about parables a lot this summer. They are stories, not to be taken literally, but stories that are layered with meaning. So, from this parable, what do we learn about God and the Kingdom of God?

Many are invited to participate, in fact all are invited to participate. Those who already know the king and those who do not yet know the king. The invitation is indiscriminate. All are invited.

But of those who are invited, some have to be asked over and over again. Some choose not to participate at all, some choose to participate fully, and others only partially. It's the choice of those invited as to how much to participate. So while it seems that wearing the wrong clothes takes a person to the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, it's really about participation not about a fashion statement.

We are invited over and over again to participate in the building up of the Kingdom of God, here in this life, right now, and the wedding feasts are all around us. How many of us really participate as fully as we are able? How many of us respond whole-heartedly all of the time to the invitation to God's Kingdom? Very few, or maybe none of us. Instead we are like the Israelites in the desert who get tired of waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain and decide to make our own versions of the golden calf. Reliance on taking care of ourselves, on our own financial stability, on our own ability to be good most of the time. Reliance on being better than others. Reliance on anything other than God.

God's love is a love that endures all that the world can throw at us, and endures despite the ways in which we try to block God's love with our own versions of love. And in the absence of love, God's love, people are capable of great atrocities as we've seen in the war between Hamas and Israel, and between Russian and Ukraine.

God's love requires self-sacrifice, is not easy, and isn't often recognized by the world around us as love. When we cannot acknowledge our own failure to show up at the banquet and fall to our knees in sorrow, we are unable to see the "other" as the Beloved Child of God. Love requires us to see all people as beloved of God, to listen deeply to one another, and to offer God's love even to our enemies. God's love demands that we also call out hate when we see it and that we work for justice and peace for everyone. Love shows us that we cannot do it alone but with one another within the Kingdom of God's love. We have to put on the mantle of love, a wedding robe if you will, and fully

participate in bringing about the Kingdom of God in this time and in this place with the urgency and abandonment of all other work and rush to the wedding banquet before it's too late. There is a feast to participate in and we're to show up and bring everyone we can think of to come with us. When we don't respond in the way that God asks us to respond, we rely on God's grace to go before us and to come up behind us to carry us into the Kingdom as our opening collect says. And God will give us the grace we need, but it is our choice to join the feast or to sit it out. Our participation is wanted and needed, but the choice is ours. Yet God will never stop inviting us. Amen.