

*Help us, God, to understand your Word, to find ways to live it out, to let it change us, and to share your Word with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Today's Gospel reading doesn't usually top anyone's list of favorite parables of Jesus. This story can be hard to hear. When the lector gets to the end and says, "The word of the Lord," we may have responses other than "thanks be to God."

At first blush, this parable seems to describe harsh judgment against several groups of people. And even though we know that God is the one – the *only* one – who has authority to judge people, we still don't like to hear stories in which that judgment is meted out.

Well, I have good news for you today.

I don't think that the parable in today's Gospel is primarily about judgment. I'd like to suggest that the underlying theme is about how to live in community with one another.

The first step to making sense of a confusing or disturbing Bible passage is to explore its historical and cultural context. Is there something going on here that doesn't quite translate to 21<sup>st</sup>-century America? Usually the answer is yes.

So, let's start at the end.

What was really going on with that guest who was kicked out of the wedding banquet?

One of the guests who was pulled in from off the street gets kicked out of the banquet for not wearing the right clothes.

Well, he certainly hadn't planned on going to a wedding that day! If the host is inviting random people in you'd think that those people would be showing up in all manner of dress.

And that was probably the case.

But going to a wedding at the king's house would have been like going to an event at a club with a dress code. If you show up without a jacket or tie, whoever's at the door is not going to let you in. But he may offer to let you borrow a jacket or tie from the closet of those available to guests.

This analogy really only works for men... but since we've got a male wedding guest, and a patriarchal society, women, as I know you're used to by now, we're going to stick with the analogy of a dress code for men.

Some places have strict requirements regarding what you can wear in order to get in, but then they will also help you to meet those requirements. You may have to wear a sports coat that smells like someone else's sweat, or a tie that doesn't match your shirt, but those items of clothing are the price of admission. So you deal with it, put on the jacket and tie, and head in to the event.

The king's son's wedding banquet would have been like that. Everyone who entered would have been offered a robe to wear. Even someone who had come from the streets wearing nothing but rags would have been given an appropriate garment to put on before entering the party. It was simply an expectation of attending the event.

If there was a guest who wasn't wearing a wedding robe, it was because he had refused to accept what had been offered to him.

Maybe this guest was one of the "bad" people that Jesus tells us was invited in.

Maybe he simply didn't care about the dress code and wasn't willing to buy in to the expectations of the system.

So he chose to wear his own dirty old clothes, thank you very much!

But I think it's more likely that the offending guest was one of the "good" people. I'd bet that he was expecting to be invited to the wedding in the first place, and was offended when no invitation showed up. He had already cleared the date on his calendar and picked out the clothes to wear.

When the invitation finally did come to him, after all the other guests had turned it down, this guy was ready to go. He figured that he'd better go, actually, so that the room wouldn't just be filled with that riff-raff the king had been forced to invite to fill the banquet hall.

They were such a disgrace. Didn't even have clothes to wear – had to borrow the robes from those provided at the door.

Well, this guest was going to make sure that there was some measure of respectability at the celebration. Compared to all the other attendees, he *deserved* to be there. His presence would raise the bar for the other guests.

The problem was, the king didn't agree with this guest's assessment of the situation. As host, he was happy to have everyone begin with a level playing field. Everyone should have been wearing the same robe – and then there would have been no way to distinguish social standing by appearances alone.

This arrangement would have made for a peaceful celebration, with some great community-building opportunities.

For the king, having all the guests – all his subjects – getting along easily with one another would have made his job way simpler as a ruler!

But this one arrogant guest was messing things up. This was already attempt number three at having a successful wedding banquet for his son, so the host had no patience left for shenanigans. There was a guest who wasn't playing by the rules and building up community? Away with him!

There were rules that governed proper behavior at the wedding banquet, specifically in this case, a dress code.

And one guest wasn't willing to play by the community's rules. He thought that his own preferences were more important than the values of his neighbors.

So he had to go.

As followers of Jesus, we are asked to prioritize the needs and rules and expectations of the community above our own opinions or preferences.

This is hard sometimes. But it is what Jesus asks of us. And this parable shows us what happens to someone who doesn't put the community first.

We can learn from the example of the guest who was cast out of the celebration.

Belonging to the community of people who follow Jesus is more important than our own ideology, no matter how great we think it is. That's what we learn from the end of today's parable.

But, of course, the parable doesn't begin with someone being kicked out.

So let's go back to the beginning.

The king had invited some guests to his son's wedding feast, and at the last minute, they all decided to turn down the invitation.

I'm too busy. There's a family thing I have to deal with. Something came up at work. My kid has a soccer game. Who are you to tell me what to do with my time anyway? I'm not coming!

The invited guests were downright rude to the host, and they also weren't playing by the community rules.

This was a celebration for *all* of them. The king's son was getting married! Royal weddings are a cause for international celebration, even today, when most countries aren't ruled by monarchs.

Even if it's not your thing, it's just good manners to pay attention to the king's son's wedding.

Just like, even if it's not your thing, it's just good manners to know whether the Brewers made the playoffs, if the Packers are winning or losing, or if this is graduation week for the local high school or college.

These are the things that you pay attention to as part of a community.

But the invited guests wouldn't play by the rules.

They said, I don't care about your celebrations or your social conventions. The things going on in my personal life are more important than the events of the community. So I'm just going to stay over here in my own private bubble, separate from all the rest of you, and ignore your celebrations.

Leave me alone.

I want nothing to do with you.

Can you understand how offensive this would have been to the person whose job was to govern a whole community?

If they didn't recognize any common authority, or any affinity with their neighbor, how was the king supposed to do his job?

If the people wouldn't come together to celebrate, there was no way that they would be able to make it through the next crisis together.

It's like I've told families countless times.

One day, it's probably just going to be you and your siblings gathered around the hospital bed of one of your parents.

How will you be able to make decisions together in that moment, when your sadness and anger are at the forefront and adrenaline is running high, if you haven't built up the relationship before that time by celebrating together, and by spending time simply being in community with one another?

The king had invited his subjects to a banquet in celebration of his son's marriage. Those who refused to join in were, in effect, telling the king that they didn't care about celebrating this happy time, and so they also wouldn't care about sticking with him in the bad times.

The king's reaction seems extreme. But we all know that this is a parable. It's not an account of an event that actually happened.

In a parable, people's actions & reactions may be exaggerated to prove a point. So, in the parable, these people basically told the king that they didn't care about being in community with him or with their other neighbors. The king responded by punishing them.

Yes, the punishment was extreme.  
But the point is that being faithful to your community is important.

Last week we heard about Paul, who prioritized his identity in Christ above all else. Whatever achievements he had reached in life were meaningless compared to his identity as a child of God and a Christian.

Today's reading brings us one step further.  
Yes: basing your identity in Christ is of utmost importance.

But only slightly less important is this:  
Be a Christian *in community*. And let all of your actions, your energy, your possessions, your abilities, benefit the health and growth of that community.

The community needs your participation – come to the banquet!  
And the community needs your cooperation – play by the rules that the host and the other members of the community understand.

Now, sometimes there are unjust rules, or expectations that need to be thrown out the window. Don't worry about playing by those rules.

But when the community is sincerely trying their best to embody the Gospel of Christ – in that case, your job is to figure out what that community needs, and how you can best support it.  
Your identity as a child of God and a follower of Jesus comes above all else.

And your identity as a member of a community that follows Jesus is a close second.  
That's the point of today's parable from Jesus.

It's a tough passage to hear. But it gives us good advice for living as faithful followers of Jesus.  
So, as we head out into the world, may we all be willing to put God and neighbor before ourselves. And may God give us the strength to do so.  
Amen.