

Recently, I was driving and had my IPOD connected to the car's stereo system. It was playing on shuffle thereby giving me the best radio station out there: all the songs I love with none of the commercials. And yes, I am one of those crazy persons you see on the road singing away at the top of their lungs, with my dog Allie in the back seat covering her ears. As I was singing and driving I was thinking about today's Gospel reading and considering preaching possibilities. In one of those flukes that happen in life the REM song "World Leader Pretend" came on, and I was singing along until I came to the verse that says "*It's high time I raze the walls that I've constructed*"Don't you just love a good turn of phrase? Razing as in tearing down, as opposed to raising as in building: word-smithing can be so much fun. That verse got me thinking about today's Gospel in a different way.

As is probably obvious, this is another judgment parable, the give-away being Matthew's infamous "weeping and gnashing of teeth" line. This is actually the third and last in a triad of judgment parables we have recently heard: the parable of the two sons (one saying yup I'll go to the field and then doesn't and the other son who says, nope not gonna, and then changes his mind and he does go); and the parable of the vineyard and the lease-holders (those who refused to live up to their end of the bargain to provide the fruits of the vineyard). And then we have today's judgment parable that has a whole bunch of disconcerting elements within the parable. We have a wedding banquet that none of the invited guests come to. The king sends his slaves out who are ignored by some and killed by others. The king then gets angry and kills those and burns the city and sends more slaves to invite everyone and anyone they can find to the banquet. And then this king notices an individual not appropriately attired, although that wasn't made part of the invite, and he has this individual bound hand and foot thrown out into the darkness. There is this seeming conflict between the king inviting *everyone* found on the road and then kicking someone out for not wearing the proper garment.

All this ignoring and killing and burning and binding and casting out actually gets in the way of understanding this parable. This is one of those parables that can be utilized to condemn people, to exclude people from being part of the Body of Christ. And that is certainly one way to understand and interpret this Gospel. There are other ways. By getting lost in the condemnation descriptions in this parable we can easily lose the point that this wedding banquet we are being invited to is just that: a wedding feast. The Kingdom of God, this wedding feast, is a joyous thing, like a wedding banquet is meant to be a joyous event. We are not being invited to some somber, breast-beating, self-flagellation event, but rather we are *invited into joy*. As the Letter to the Philippians reminds us we are called to "*Rejoice*" in this new-found kingdom! Rejoice!

Many of the commentators on this Gospel passage indicate that the individual kicked out of the wedding banquet for not wearing the proper garment is indicative of this individual not having a certain goodness within. The individual was missing a certain attitude of respect, the individual was too complacent about life and how to live life. Those are all good and appropriate and possible interpretations. Perhaps there is another.

In early Christendom, when a person became part of the Christian community, when the conversion happened, they changed clothes. Through this physical act they were clearly saying

that they were giving up the old and were on to something new in their lives. They were declaring themselves as something new, something different by this *outward physical manifestation of this new and inward change*. Sound familiar? (See BCP page number 857, “The Sacraments”) This change of clothes in our Gospel passage is evocative of a sacramental act. They were proving not only that they were ready for this change, but that change had occurred, that they were changed and ready to appear before God and their new spiritual family.

If we dig a little deeper about this idea of being ready, making ourselves appropriately attired, we come to the idea of razing walls that we have constructed, were we began this sermon. We are called as Christians to love and do justice. We are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we have built barriers behind which we hide our true selves, how do we reach others and love them? How do we open ourselves to God’s love if we are hidden behind these constructed defenses? Our Collect for today begins with “Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...” We are praying that God’s grace, God’s love will *envelope* us, embrace us, hold us dearly. How can that happen if our walls are so high that no one can get in, not even God?...Our relationship with God is reciprocal: although the grace of God’s love for us is unchecked and knows no bounds, we still *have to let that love in*, acknowledge that love and incorporate that love into our lives.

As dangerous and self-revealing as this action will be for us personally, in order to love and to be loved, we must raze these walls that we’ve constructed, we must tear them down. This is a supreme act of trust, and one that has many perils associated with it. I am not suggesting that we make ourselves completely defenseless to the world, for there are people who will take advantage of us by seeing our vulnerabilities. We are called to be open and defenseless to God and to those whom we love and we are called to love....for in love there is deep trust. By letting go of those defenses, by opening ourselves to God’s love and the love of those who love us, we are becoming fully human, *fully and appropriately clothed for the banquet*, fully enveloped in God’s grace.

And by being more fully open and enveloped, we become different people, we are changed forever. Will everything be perfect in our lives? Will injury or hurt never be a part of our lives again? No, they will still happen. But our ability to handle those situations will change as we are changed. We become more generous, with ourselves, with our gifts and talents and with our resources. And at the center of this change is joy. A joy that we know when we feel it and we know when we see it in someone else...And if we don’t have that joy, boy oh boy do we ever want it when we see it.....That joy is there for us, it is offered to each and everyone of us....We are called to strip off the old garments, put on the new! Allow God’s grace to envelope us!

As we all gather around for our table today, to participate in the sacramental act of our Eucharistic Prayer, all of us are part of a joyous feast. In order to fully participate, we need to raze those constructed walls....allow God in and allow each other in. We start with God and then move out from there. Raze those walls that we have constructed and become new and generous and loving and joyous! God’s offer is there for each and every one of us. Amen.