

**Grace Episcopal Church  
Galena, Illinois  
October 12, 2014  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23A**

**The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**  
Text—Matthew 22: 1-14

A night out to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is always a treat. Among the most memorable concerts was one not part of a regular season. It was a benefit performance for a Chicago area organization. Our tickets came to us third hand because the benefactor was unable to attend, and our relative who was given the tickets didn't really care for orchestral music.

Dressed in our best, we walked into the concert hall. As we were directed to our seats, we quickly realized that the original recipient was a most generous donor. There we were, not in our more customary "nose bleed" section but main floor, center, among the dazzle of evening clothes and jewels. Way out of our league!

The concert, conducted by Kurt Masur, featured a young Russian violinist and was delightful. Adding to our delight: our tickets entitled us to a post-concert reception. We got a huge kick out of sipping champagne and pretending that we, too, were well-to-do contributors, even being so bold as to approach the conductor and violinist to congratulate them on their performances. But we knew that with my decidedly non-designer dress, my lack of an Oak Street salon hairdo, and shoes from Famous Footwear rather than Jimmy Choo, we were merely imposters.

The ending of today's parable from the Gospel of Matthew deals with an imposter, too. Here is a man who, along with a huge number of other people, both bad and good, was sought from the highways and byways to attend the grand wedding banquet for the king's son. This crowd was meant to replace those originally invited who chose, for various reasons, not to attend. Just this one man is singled out by the king and cast into eternal darkness because he is not in the proper attire.

This ending is not the only strange part of this parable. Just like in our gospel lesson some weeks ago, Matthew is back in the judgment and end-times motif. For those of us who think of a God who is gracious and forgiving, the violence here makes us cringe. This is clearly a story that cries out for understanding, and it is beneficial to consider different layers of meaning and context. Part of the same story appears in Luke and in the Gospel of Thomas, but the ending is unique to Matthew.

It is a parable of Jesus, of course, and Matthew situates it as the last of three stories where Jesus once again confronts Pharisees and chief priests who challenge his authority during his last week in Jerusalem. It begins with that familiar line, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like.." and goes on to describe a royal banquet scene where it is the least likely people who are present.

In the Middle Ages, a common way to understand scripture was as allegory. Using that method, we would hear a tale of how Jesus was rejected as the son of God by the chosen people, thus: the King is God, the son Jesus; the original invited guests are the people of the Covenant, the Jews or

Israelites. The slaves who go out with the courtesy reminder of the feast are the Old Testament Prophets, many of whom are mistreated or martyred; the later slaves who went out into the streets are early followers of Jesus, and the replacement guests represent the outreach to all people, to the Gentiles. This is probably simplistic and suited more for medieval folk than for those in Matthew's own community some 50 or 60 years after Jesus' ministry and death. With the temple in Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans, so of the Jewish faith and practice which had been centered on that temple was in flux and in need of reinvention. Divisions had erupted between those Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not. Because a large part of the Jewish community has rejected Jesus, the mission by Paul and others was expanded to Gentiles. This created disagreement and confusion about following the Law—who would be included and who would not. It was a time of high anxiety and competition, and, apparently, discipline problems because of the lack of clarity and standards.

So, we have the story in the time of Jesus (as told by Matthew). Through Matthew's telling, we see the situations and tensions in which his own community lived. But we still need one more layer. It is all well and good to understand that first century time and the anxieties of its people. But what does this story tell us amidst the anxieties of 2014? What is the Good News for us in a time of renewed violence in the Middle East, in Africa and in our own cities. How does an ancient tale continue to speak to us in a time of economic uncertainty? What does this guy thrown into the darkness for wearing the wrong clothes have to do with us? Why do I call him an imposter?

For me, at least, he is the key. We know, of course, that this really isn't about his clothing. The apostle Paul uses the metaphor of "putting on Christ" as a way of life, and our lesson from his letter to the Philippians this morning gives us an idea of what that means: those things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and so on. We are to clothe our selves in these as we come before God. This story is paradoxical. On one hand, everyone, good and bad, is invited to the feast. On the other hand, one of those invited is cast out into darkness. But our faith *is* paradoxical, isn't it: death and resurrection, losing life to gain it...?

This story is about grace *and* about expectation: the grace is that God's party goes on, the feast is ready no matter what and all are invited. We do not need to earn the invitation. But maybe we *are* expected to come prepared to receive it. In this way, we honor the giver.

When I attended that benefit with the CSO, I knew nothing about the sponsoring organization, I had no intention of getting involved or contributing. I simply enjoyed the music and the reception. And I think the guy in the wrong clothes did something similar. Now enjoyment—drinking the wine, eating the prime rib and triple chocolate delight, and going home stuffed and self-satisfied is not all bad. A feast, after all, is for company and good food; a concert for entertainment. But what about church? Is this enough for church?

When I went back to church after a long absence, I was looking for company. For belonging and fellowship. Oh, and I liked the music and enjoyed singing in the choir. The faith stuff? Not so much. I've told you my story: I didn't know what I believed—or even *if* I believed. Oh, I liked to have a time of peace where I could simply put aside the worries that nibbled and gnawed at me. Or a ritual that made me feel comfortable and good. But I was not bring my entire self before God, willing to turn my whole self and my whole life over to the possibilities of a new way.

I was lucky. Little by little, I began to see faith operating in those around me—how what they

professed on Sunday morning informed and directed their Monday through Saturday lives. It was a church, like the Episcopal Church, that was open and accepting, not demanding certain beliefs or ways of being. I did not feel pushed or pulled into a certain mold. Instead, life began to take on new meaning, my little spot in the universe new significance. I began, I suppose, to begin to “put on Christ”—one sandal at a time. And I came to value the church as the place where that could happen for all of us—through prayer and ritual that brought us closer to God. Through community that rejoiced and struggled together. It continues for me in every congregation, though I have to keep working at it. Those sandals keep coming untied!

Matthew’s story has a sense of urgency. It reflects the belief that Jesus’ return would come about sooner rather than later. Time was running short. His community needed to be ready. Some 2,000 years later, Jesus’ return hasn’t happened. With the exception of those few who periodically predict that the end is coming, that sense of urgency has receded. But perhaps it shouldn’t.

There is the reality that not one of us knows how long we have in this life. We all know someone—maybe even ourselves—who finds new and deeper meaning in life after facing a close call. Even without such an experience, though, don’t we want to make the most of each day? Don’t we want our lives to have meaning and significance?

God has fulfilled the covenant—opening the banquet table to all of us, welcoming us as we are. In the alternate reading for today that we did not use, the prophet Isaiah describes in beautiful images a “feast of rich food filled with marrow and well-aged wines strained clear.” And if we truly partake of this feast, we must come and taste, we must respond to God’s grace by living into it, by putting on Christ, by bearing fruit for God’s realm. “So, rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near.” The time is now—today. The table awaits, and there is a place there for you.

Amen.