

THE SEVENTEEN SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Series A, Lectionary 28

October 9, 2011

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

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“You prepare a table before me . . . and my cup is running over.”

Our psalm antiphon for today ties all our readings together as a purple ribbon running through them. I suggest purple because of Lydia, the first person to be baptized by the Apostle Paul in Philippi. (Two of our new confirmation youth, Jada Olson, who is our acolyte at 10:30 this morning, and Lauren Schmidt, indicated on their information sheets that purple is their favorite color!) Lydia would have been one of the members of the church to whom Paul later wrote his letter to the Philippians. Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, and purple was the most expensive dye available at that time. Purple thus represents lavishness, the lavishness of God’s grace. Our psalm antiphon ties all our readings together as a purple ribbon running through them.

“You prepare a table before me . . . and my cup is running over.”

I have been involved in hundreds of weddings during my ministry, either as pastor or musician. One of the most memorable was the wedding between my first-cousin, Valerie, and her fiancé, Michael. I remember that I focused my wedding sermon around two images, one for Val and the other for Mike.

The image that best describes Val is *glue*. Val is the glue that holds her family together, the one who makes the phone calls, who writes the cards and letters, the one who follows up on the details, the one who is the first one to be there for someone in trouble, someone experiencing pain or loss. Val is the one who is the first to initiate the necessary steps towards reconciliation when relationships are strained. Val is the glue, and Val was the glue between almost all of us who were at her wedding.

The image that best describes Mike, on the other hand, is *hyperbole*. Everything about Mike is exaggerated, in excess, over the top, going the extra mile, adding just one more thing to his already over-filled plate. Mike is the epitome of overstatement. Mike is, in his heart-of-heart, an actor. Mike is the single-scoop ice cream cone from the Portland Malt Shop on Superior Street that is really a double scoop; no need to ask for the double scoop when the single scoop is already a double!

The reason the wedding between Valerie and Michael was memorable is that it was *hyperbole*: it was held at the Renaissance Festival in the Cities—remember, I told you

Mike is an actor—and we were all in Elizabethan costume—not just the wedding party, but everyone! I remember I had the simplest and most modest costume—a monk’s robe and sandals. Simple!

You ask me, where did everyone get Elizabethan costumes to wear to the wedding? Easy! Remember, Michael is an actor! All the costumes were rented, and Mike made sure that everyone had access to one.

What a festive day it was. Not only were the costumes Elizabethan; so was the music! Lutes and viols and period brass instruments. I played a set of variations on the harpsichord by Elizabethan composer John Dowland. The dinner was what might have been served at an Elizabethan banquet. And then there was Elizabethan dancing. It was as authentic as they could make it. (Fortunately, Mike and Val had rented a great many modern portable Johns; it is possible to carry the Elizabethan theme a bit too far, after all!)

I wonder if *hyperbole* might be a helpful notion for us to get at our gospel for today.

Are there some things about our gospel that jump out at you as a bit over-the-top? What about the reaction of those on the original guest list? Not only did they refuse to come to the wedding banquet, but they seized the king’s messengers, maltreated them, and killed them. A little over-the-top, perhaps? And what about the king’s response: “The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.” I wonder if the queen was worried that the dinner was getting cold while all this killing and burning was going on! And then there’s the ending. The wedding hall is filled with guests who have been pulled in off the streets. The king comes in and finds one of them without a wedding garment. The king says, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” The man was speechless. The king said to his servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Again, a bit over-the-top, perhaps? Just a little bit of hyperbole?

In a story, context is everything—almost everything. First of all, conflict and hostility are escalated as high as they could possibly be. Jesus is in Jerusalem during the last week of his life; he has “cleansed” the Temple of the money changers and challenged the religious authorities, who are looking desperately for a way to arrest him to be rid of him for good. The crowds are with Jesus, and the tension is thick, palpable, almost to the boiling point, more like the 1968 riots in Chicago around the Democratic National Convention than like the peaceful Wall Street protests around this country.

Interpreters of the New Testament tell us this: Those who had been on the original guest list for the king’s son’s wedding banquet represent the religious and political leaders who had ignored, persecuted, and killed God’s prophets throughout the history of Israel. The image of the king sending his troops to destroy those murders and burn their city is reference to the Romans’ destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. And the king throwing the guest without the wedding robe out into the outer darkness . . . we’ll get to that.

If Valerie's husband, Michael, is a master of hyperbole, Jesus as told through our gospel writer Matthew is even more so!

Not only is there hyperbole in the wedding between Valerie and Michael, there is also glue. While our Apostle Paul was also a master of hyperbole, he is trying to offer the glue in his letter to his beloved church in Philippi. Of all his letters, I find Philippians to be the most endearing (I shared a bit of this last Sunday). He is writing from prison, he doubts he will ever see any of them again, and he is concerned about their welfare. He is even earnestly seeking reconciliation between two women in the church, Euodia and Synthyche, who seem to be having a conflict. Paul writes, "I urge Euodia and I urge Synthyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companions, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel . . ." Paul wants to offer the glue that will bind these two women together in Christ.

Paul tells the Philippians—and all of us—how to weigh our priorities, our values, all of which determine our actions: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Paul is offering the glue that binds the church together. If we were to ask Jesus about the wedding robe, he might say exactly what the Apostle Paul said.

One way to look at the wedding robe is that it represents our baptismal outfit. It is customary for the newly baptized to wear a new, white outfit, representing that we have taken off the old and put on the new, we have put on our Lord Jesus Christ. To refuse to wear our wedding robe would be to reject our baptism.

N.T. Wright, Anglican priest and New Testament scholar and author of the study, *Matthew for Everyone*, writes about the wedding robe and what he calls the truth of our parable:

. . . the truth that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you are saying you don't want to stay at the party. That is the reality. If we don't have the courage to say so, we are deceiving ourselves, and everyone who listens to us.¹

Let's go back to the wedding of Valerie and Michael at the Renaissance Festival with all the lavish Elizabethan costumes. I must admit that, when I first put my monk's robe on, with my hairy bare legs and sandals, I felt a bit awkward. As I watched the guests begin to arrive, I noted that most of them seemed to feel very out of place, a bit embarrassed, a bit silly. As the afternoon and evening wore on, and we were wanting very much to please Val and Mike, who had worked so hard to make this extravagant event possible,

we became more and more comfortable in our costumes and it all began to feel quite natural. What I didn't mention is that there were a few guests who had chosen *not* to wear costumes. I noticed that those few who had come who had refused the invitation to don Elizabethan costumes were looking more and more *out of place*. They were not having as much fun. They began to look like *they really didn't belong there*.

This morning, after we have come forward for the Lord's Supper—the Wedding Feast of the Lord Jesus and his Bride, the Church—you will each receive a purple ribbon around your neck; it is your wedding robe. It is God's gift to you, and you are invited by our Lord to wear it proudly. It is the wedding robe of “love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness,” as N.T. Wright says. It is goodness and mercy that follow us all the days of our lives, as our beloved Psalm 23 sings. Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives when we *wear* goodness and mercy as our wedding robe, when goodness and mercy flow forth from us, as goodness and mercy have been bestowed upon us from our Lord, our Good Shepherd.

“You prepare a table before me . . . and my cup is running over.”

Thanks be to God!

¹N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 85.