

Nineteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): The Importance of RSVP'ing "Yes" & Showing Up
Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
October 10-11, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Hopefully many of you have seen the hilarious U-tube video of an Episcopal priest, Rev. Lonnie Lacy, performing a parody of the hit "You'll Be Back" from *Hamilton*. Don't be alarmed – I'm not going to try to match his song and dance. But I might "hum a few bars" of a song I learned as a child about today's Gospel (or at least the version of it that St. Luke tells):

I cannot come,
I cannot come to the banquet,
Don't trouble me now,
I have married a wife,
I have bought me a cow,
I have fields and commitments
That cost a pretty sum,
Pray hold me excused,
I cannot come.

Jesus tells this parable about a king inviting a ton of people to his son's wedding banquet. Shockingly, all the RSVP's come back "No." (I'm not even sure they said, "No, **thank you.**") So the king sends out his minions **again** with the invitation. Even worse than repeating their "no," this time some people are flippant about the king's invitation and scornfully keep going about their business, while others become homicidal and kill the king's messengers. In turn, the king sends soldiers to murder the murderers and torch their city. (So we're reminded this isn't **meant** to be a **believable** story. Like all parables, it's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning....)

The King is determined to fill the banquet hall and get his money's worth out of each place setting he's paid for. He sends out his slaves yet again to drum up whatever business they can, no credentials necessary, no background check to be performed. (In St. Luke's Gospel, there's mention of rounding up "*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame*" Luke 14:21) There's an open door and a 5 course meal for whomever they can drag in, "good and bad" alike (Matt. 22:10).

The unlikely developments in the plot continue. Everyone's **finally** gathered and seated, and the king sees someone without a wedding robe. "*Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*" (Matt. 22:12) (As we've noted before, what's translated "friend" is really more along the lines of "Hey, bud," or "Mac, you there" like the owner of the vineyard who asked a few weeks ago, "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?*" Matt. 20:13)

We hear, "*Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*" and we think: the king's men were scouring back alleys, scraping the bottom of the barrel for enough people to fill the hall, then hauling them in, so of course this poor man who's been surprisingly elevated from street person to the status of the king's guest either didn't own or didn't have time to retrieve proper wedding duds! But this **is** a parable and not a news account, so that's **not** the point. The wedding robe stands for righteousness, for being a "spiritually stand up" person, able to be upright before God because of holy living **and** the humility to seek and accept forgiveness for **un**holy living. We may arrive at the banquet in the tatters of our sin, but don't have to stay that way. We don't sit there pretending we're clean and sweet smelling when we haven't had a bath or a change of clothes in three months. We show up and reveal our true selves because we **trust** the Lord, who says:

*though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.*
Isaiah 1:18b-c

We don't have to play-act like hypocrites, acting virtuous when we're anything but. Nor do we have to cower in fear, shielding ourselves from imagined blows. We're able to come in humility and honesty, asking forgiveness for our freely-admitted failures in love from our merciful God.

Do you see that in the end **everybody** has been invited to this wedding banquet? The only ones who don't end up there are those who RSVP'd "No" or who didn't respond at all. **God** isn't excluding anyone. Episcopal priest/author/chef, Robert Farrar Capon puts it like this:

Nobody is kicked out who wasn't already in.
 ...[Hell]... remains radically unnecessary.¹

God doesn't send us to Hell. We put ourselves there. While we're still alive. It's not a matter of what we say, but of what we do.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

We need to RSVP "Yes!" and then show up, warts and all, ready for a spiritual re-make.

Every day we need to put off the rags of our sin and don our baptismal garment of God's love and forgiveness. St. Paul says:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ... (Galatians 3:27) As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12, 14)

The final of our Gospel , *"For many are called, but few are chosen"* (Matt. 22:14), is an invitation for us to look at **our own** lives and hearts and **not** those of others. Am I "worthy" (Matt. 22:8b), not in any absolute sense, but at least by virtue of attempting to love God above all else and my neighbor as myself? Is love my go-to garment? Are worshiping God and serving my neighbor my priorities? Or do I say, "Not today, maybe tomorrow"? "Pray hold me excused. I cannot come"?
 Amen

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 125.