

Sunday, October 9, 2011: Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

We might Bible-study our way through most of this difficult parable, but what do we do with the guest who is pulled in off the streets and then kicked out?

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

If you wrestle with this Matthean parable through the night, it'll leave you limping by morning. Martin Luther didn't like preaching on it, and worshipers in early October won't be in the mood for its judgment. While this teaching occurs as Jesus travels to the cross, we worshipers are still a long way from Holy Week observances. Our minds are on football games, Oktoberfest fun and Halloween costumes. We're having too much fun to gnash our teeth. But the odd gift of the lectionary is that it does not give us the freedom to avoid difficult scripture, nor does it give us total control over passages that refuse to be tamed by our interpretative tools. To mix things up even more, we are presented with Paul's glorious hymn of praise in Philippians. How do we always "rejoice in the Lord" who casts an invited guest into the outer darkness?

Those who view the Christian life through the lens of God's final judgment and divide the world into those who are blessed and not blessed may not find this parable a struggle. But I'm a theological wrestler on this one. While we might be able to "Bible study" our way through the initial allegory of the first invited guests as the people of Israel who killed the prophets and rejected God's work of salvation in Jesus, while we might understand the slaves as Christian missionaries and the newly invited ones as the gentile community, and while we might see the destruction of Jerusalem smoldering in the background, we still have to explain the guest who is pulled in off the streets at the last minute and later kicked out of the party for not wearing the proper wedding clothes. How can we understand this failure of grace in what seems to be an amazingly open party of God?

Calvin and others have taught that the one ejected from the banquet represented the one who did not "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14 and Gal. 3:27). We are all invited to the kingdom, but we are all under obligation to be clothed with Christ and to live lives of righteousness.

Sermons have been preached on this parable with the message that only practicing Christians are saved—everybody else is toast. Imagine that an active member in a congregation has just heard that sermon. She has tears in her eyes. She hears the judgment loud and clear. Her son-in-law is a self-proclaimed atheist and her granddaughter is unbaptized at age six. She has a wonderful neighbor who is Jewish; her longtime doctor is the best listener in the world—and a practicing Hindu. It turns out that she loves a lot of people who are going to hell. How can she be happy in heaven without them? She was told once that heaven will be so incredible that she won't miss these people, but she can't imagine rejoicing in the Lord under these conditions. She can't imagine her sweet grandchild in hell.

But the grandmother has accepted the invitation; she's put on Christ and considers herself clothed with righteousness. She has recommitted herself on many occasions to imitating Christ. So what would Jesus do, she wonders. The congregation rises to sing a hymn rejoicing in salvation, and worshipers dutifully recite the Apostles' Creed. The grandmother's voice catches on the words of faith, "he descended into hell." She's never had a satisfactory explanation of what Jesus was doing in hell between his death and resurrection. For her at that moment, after suffering through a sermon that sent her loved ones to outer darkness, she knew what the creed meant for her. Before he was raised from the dead, Jesus went to retrieve those who had not heard the gospel through no fault of their own. Jesus went to get those cast into outer darkness and bring them into the kingdom with him. If she was clothed with Christ, she reasoned, she was called to be like him.

By the time of the final hymn she decided that to really be like Christ, she would pass up heaven in order to comfort her grandbaby in hell. She would offer her eternal life for her grandchild's eternal life. She would descend into hell as Jesus did. She left church convinced that day that if we truly live a transformed life, we can't stand by and feast while others starve and burn. That just isn't the Jesus way!

Wise teachers of the Bible often counsel us that parables work best when we stop working so hard to interpret them and instead allow them to interpret us. I don't know if this imaginary woman has a heretical or an orthodox understanding of this

parable. I don't know what a right interpretation of this parable is, to tell the truth. But I know that any way we go at it, it's a wrestling match and that every preacher and hearer who takes it on comes away limping from the effort.

What is amazing is that the woman took the parable as a challenge to take her clothing in Christ with all seriousness. She took it so seriously that she was transformed from one who understood herself as saved and going to heaven to one who gave up heaven in order to save and protect those she loved. Isn't this what Jesus did and what Jesus would do? Orthodox interpretation or not, the parable interpreted her life, and she found herself exiting worship with a slight limp but rejoicing nevertheless.