

"Consumers? Yes. 'Presumers'? No."

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A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Text: *"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless."*

(Matthew 22:11-12, NRSV)



Image Credits: *"Friend, where is your wedding garment?"* 14th CY Russian icon of the Parable of the Feast.

This weekend it is Fall Festival Days in Zelenople. Along with the artisans, crafters, and food vendors in town, there are reenactors in bivouac representing different aspects of colonial and Native American tribal life and those representing the lives of soldiers from America's great Civil War who move into the Veterans memorial park and take residence all weekend. I am, perhaps, most appreciative of the Civil War reenactors because my great grandfather, George Silbert, served in the 32nd PA Infantry Volunteers living out his commitment to the army he served in the ways these reenactors portray that service. In seeing them and talking to them, as foot soldiers, I can reconnect to George.

The group that is encamped in Zelig Borough this weekend are members of the 101st PA Infantry Volunteers. The original unit, like that of the 32nd, was formed from companies mustered into service as part of then PA. Governor Curtin's call for 60,000 Pennsylvania volunteers in 1862. President Lincoln was impressed by the governor's action, but tried to dissuade him from it, wiring him to say in effect that Pennsylvania is already doing its part. Governor Curtin undeterred wired back, "I am not doing this in the defense of the country, but in defense of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania!" (At the time, the war was not going well and Confederate incursions into the Keystone State seemed close at hand!) Of course all these troops were rolled into the Union Army and became very much involved in the defense of America.

One thing I have learned about reenactors is that they take their roles seriously! Even down to the minute elements of their equipment, how they sleep, and what they eat and drink! During this weekend in Zelienople, they are sleeping on the hard ground beneath standard issue canvass tent cloth and eating the hardtack crackers and pot coffee brewed fireside. . . In every way, these soldiers are taking on the roles their forefathers led on distant fields of encampment long ago. I think there is a potent illustration here in their unique commitment: in order to do it the right way, they have to take on all of it; total commitment! This is not a maybe I will, maybe I won't exercise; there are no digital wrist watches strapped to their wrists, such modern easements must be left behind! You don't get to pick your uniform if you are going to act; you need to dress the part from head-to-toe.

When it comes to being part of God's kingdom, you do not get to choose whether to wear a robe or not.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

These passages from Exodus and Matthew can be summarized in this way: We want God on our terms. . . We really do.

The people of Israel had gotten tired of waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain. "Forty days and forty nights" was a Biblical colloquialism that meant "a long time." And they had been without their leader a long time. All they could see was a smoky fire on the mountain -- maybe like the one Cecil B. DeMille depicted in his epic "The Ten Commandments", a tall fiery volcanic glow -- I don't know -- but all the people knew was that he was up there somewhere with his aide-de-camp, Joshua. In some senses you could feel for their need to keep the energy going in the camp since their leader was away, but they wanted it on their terms. And you have to fault Aaron, Moses brother, in this, too, because after all he was a Levite, a priest, and should have known better. He listened to the people -- maybe he, too, was wondering where Moses was -- and ended up building the golden calf.

Imagine it in our life! Instead of this silver platen and chalice on the communion table here, see rather a golden calf. . . "*There is your God, O Israel.*" It's curious in a way because the Israelites were used to seeing that kind of statuary when they were slaves in Egypt: all kinds of weird figures; the head on the lion's body out in front of the great pyramid at Giza; the tall figures adorning the palaces in the Valley of the Kings and at Luxor. In this case they built a statue of an animal. We are told we are made in God's image, but in building that image they were trading away their own identity for something far less -- a beast -- as the god made in their image. . . Aaron allowed that to happen! He didn't see the irony of what he and the people were doing! We are made in the image of God, yet the people in that moment of boredom -- of ennui -- decided to make a different image.

They wanted God on their terms.

God, for his part, was up there on the mountain looking down at them, saying to Moses, "*The people are out of control.*" God was angry; and was prepared to "light them up" in a display of that anger! Moses, unable to see what was going on, argued on the peoples' behalf; seeing that God was

angry . . . "Wait, wait . . .!" Moses had argued with God before. Remember when he was called to go to Egypt by God?¹ He went back and forth with God, then, about how that was going to go. Here he was, again, on the mountain with YAHWEH talking God back from the edge of his destructive retribution; reminding God of the covenant he had with them.

The passage from Matthew is a different kind of consumption; and it's all the more blessed even though there is that tough moment where the guest is thrown out. In the iconographic image on the front cover of your bulletin (and the lead picture to this sermon), the unfortunate fellow is the one being bound and carried away on the extreme right of the picture.

The consumption in this parable is all that is offered in a wedding feast; the wedding of the King's son. In the many parables that Jesus tells, who often is meant by the character of the King? God - - Yes. In this parable, God is saying to the guests "*Come to the feast! All is ready! . . .*" Everyone is invited! There is a catholicity; a universality to God's invitation to join him. Think of the many times we see Jesus at table: there is a sense of inclusion; that all are welcome. . . Never do we see Jesus at table throwing someone out. It is, more the case that people looking in at Jesus at table from outside are surprised by his inclusion: "*Why, he eats with tax collectors and sinners!*" There is an inclusive, all-encompassing nature with Jesus when he is sitting at a table of food.

Now, in this passage we are looking in at a wedding feast, and as Jesus tells the story the first group who is invited didn't want to come, so the King sends his servants out to invite others in, people from the street. . . The reality is that by the time the parable is over, the King has invited every single person to come and share the joy of the feast.

Many are called, but few are chosen.

In those days, there were spare garments to put on for such an occasion; wedding robes that were appropriate dress for the celebration in case one was not able to make such a change in attire. However "the guy" got into the feast, he didn't have a gown on! -- It may have been because he refused

it (coming in the door): *"Here sir, wear this."* *"Ah, no thanks, I'm Ok as I am."* It may have been that he saw all the other people putting on the gowns and thinking, *"I don't want to be a part of THAT!"* (Concern for his self-image. . . It's true, we do like to be self-determining about things . . .) maybe he slipped in *just because*: . . . *"They'll never know I'm here -- among this rabble? Ha!"* Nevertheless, he is the only person who isn't dressed in a wedding garment.

The King comes in. And he looks at "this guy" and says that word *"hectaire"* -- the Greek word that is the equivalent of *"Hey Pal!"* -- *"Whoa, Buddy . . ."* It is not a friendly greeting! *"Friend ("Hectaire"), how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"* And he was speechless. The silence becoming its own condemnation, the King (God) says to the attendants: *"Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness . . ."*

We don't like that. . . We don't like God being so harsh. . . We just read about him changing his mind. . . This poor fellow? -- He's just one guy . . . But he is one guy, for whatever reason, who chooses to partake of the kingdom on his own terms! We don't get to do that. God's kingdom -- and this wedding banquet is a metaphor for God's kingdom -- is filled with grace! It is filled with love! It is filled with joy! And all of that is a gift given to us by God, like a garment we put on.

There is a tradition in different parts of Christendom where the ones being baptized are brought to the waters, naked -- unlike the fancy baptismal gowns that babies in our tradition often wear. And the very first thing that is done, as they come out of the waters, is that they are clothed, immediately, in a white robe (often bearing a stitched red cross) because they are now clothed in Christ! They put his mantle on and they are then marked as one of Christ's own.

The people who put on the wedding garments are part of the kingdom. And remember what the parable says, *"Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests."* Did you read that?. . GOOD AND BAD! Your inclusion in the Kingdom does not depend on how good you are; it's not a merit-based system. Rather,

it is about accepting the fact that you are accepted. And when you say "Yes" to that, you put on a garment that is indicative of your being part of that kingdom! The fact that this fellow is sitting there without a garment is a flat-cold rejection of the kingdom itself -- wanting God, wanting that kingdom, wanting it all, on his terms. And the answer to that is "*bind him hands and feet and throw him out. . .*"

There is a level of attainment to God's kingdom by his grace to take on Christ, daily; to be representing him, like a garment that we wear, as we proceed into our lives. It is as though life itself is a banquet and we are moving towards that final banquet at the culmination of all things. What we do every time we break bread at the Lord's Table is rehearsal for that banquet! (The marriage supper of the Lamb, spoken of in Revelations.ⁱⁱ) It is an important thing we do here at this table.

But there is appropriateness to God's grace. Grace is free, but it's not cheap.

Fred Craddock, the late great preacher and teacher tells a story that I find amazing. Though born and raised in the great central plains of Oklahoma, he became a storied professor of preaching at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. As a teacher, he was often asked to give talks and special programs in churches throughout Georgia. One icy cold night he was supposed to give a talk at a small, rural church. He arrived in the sleet and rain to find only a couple of cars in the church lot and a mostly darkened building. Venturing inside, he followed what light there was to find a small group of three or four men sitting at a table playing cards. "*You the preacher?*" one of the men said. "*Yes,*" Fred replied. "*Well we're here to tell you the event is cancelled due to the weather.*" They returned to their card game. As Fred continued to look more closely at the group, he saw to his surprise that the table they were sitting at was inscribed with the words, "*In Remembrance of Me*" . . . "In- remembrance-of . . . Playing cards at the *Communion Table*? . . . That's not appropriate . . .

Grace is free, but it's not cheap.

We are consumers of God's grace, yes; but "presumers", no. We do not receive the gift of the kingdom on our terms. In fact, at our baptism, we take off our old selves and are re-clothed in the love and joy of Jesus. It is a special robe God gives us to wear that we may celebrate in joy with him, forever.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 3-4:17

ⁱⁱ See Revelation 19:1-10 and Revelation 21-22.