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Changing for the Wedding Banquet

A few weeks before Drew and I were about to welcome our first child into the world, one of the young dad's in our church approached Drew, asking "Are you ready?!" Before Drew could even finish his pre-rehearsed, "yeah, we have the car seat installed, and the crib set up, and..." The other dad looked him straight in the eye, slapped him on the back and said, "You're not ready!" (He may have inserted an expletive in there, but you get the point). What I remember about that interaction was driving home that evening, as Drew recounted the story to me, stating, "I mean I know we're not 'ready', but we have an idea of what it's going to be like." But, the truth was that dad was right, we were not ready, at all. Because, we had no earthly idea how our lives and our world were about to be completely and utterly changed forever.

There is a reason, I believe, that Jesus used parables so often. Especially as he refers to the Kingdom of Heaven. Often beginning with, "The Kingdom of Heaven MAY be compared to..." Not "the Kingdom of Heaven is exactly like..." Because nothing on this earth is exactly like it. We can't truly understand or grasp it because, well... we don't know it, not yet, not fully. Just like Drew and I had no clue what parenthood would look like until we became parents. I mean, we gathered there would be sleepless nights, diaper blowouts, and a ton of laundry. But, we couldn't fully grasp it until we got there. Until we realized that sleeping, eating, (and eventually) pottying weren't actually hardwired into our basic daily functionings. We couldn't comprehend the actual dangers of sleep deprivation until we had gone weeks on end without a consecutive full 4 hours of sleep. And we certainly weren't able to anticipate the way one 6 lbs 4 oz baby could become the center of our universe from the moment we heard that first life giving and life changing wail of a cry.

As I noted earlier, while parables are allegories, they are not direct references. The King in our story, with a short temper and a propensity for violence cannot, and I would argue should not, be wholly compared to God. Likewise the first guests invited cannot, and should not, be compared to the entirety of the nation of Israel. Jesus' parables at best give us a glimpse at what Jesus is trying to convey, and at worst become our own assumptions of who, what, where life beyond the grave will be. At the same time our parable for today needs to be seen within the context of the time and place in which it was written. A time in which the early followers of Christ, and the Matthean community itself, had witnessed and experienced significant changes as well as travesties. Travesties like the overthrow of Jerusalem by Rome and the destruction of the Temple. And, changes like Gentiles, who had no history or understanding of the God of Israel, being invited into the Jewish community of Christ followers.

And, so here we are arriving at the Wedding Banquet, as we hear Jesus say, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." A banquet in which all the guests were either too busy to be bothered, or too caught up in their daily lives to take part in the joy of the festivities and fulfillment of the feast being offered. Not so busy, though, that they didn't have time to first murder a few of the messengers. If that wasn't bad enough the last minute all inclusive guests, whether good or bad, while they did show up, failed to come prepared and ready as is appropriate and necessary to fully participate and experience the wedding banquet in all its glory and enjoyment. As we hear the king ask, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"

There are some really disturbing aspects of our parable for today, mainly the king's failure to keep his anger and rage in check. As he destroys and burns the city of the first invited guests who fail to attend the banquet. Or, as he has the "friend," who has failed to wear the wedding garment, bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where, as we are told, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. At the same time, there are some really beautiful and very significant aspects of our parable. Like the fact that the King, wanting to celebrate the wedding of his son, and share the feast that has been prepared, without guests to attend, opens his own banquet hall to any and everyone who will show up, the good and the bad, all in order to share the abundance. Even more, just as all are invited, all are also (as would have been custom at that time) provided with the appropriate attire, being offered the wedding garment necessary to attend, should they not have their own. Provided with everything needed to fully participate and partake of the fullness and glory of the festivities offered before them.

This parable, it isn't perfect, but neither is this world. I mean often, or at least some of the time, it's a real mess, even more a travesty. Just think of our brothers and sisters at war in Israel and Palentstine, or Ukraine and Russia. Or our government workers waiting with bated breath for the next shut down. Or our neighbors serving on this county's school board, turning a governing body to support the education of our own children into a mud slinging competition. It's a mess! And yet, Jesus is working with what he's got to try and gain our attention, to relay his message, and lead us towards something like salvation, not only for tomorrow, but for today.

Drew and I had no idea what we were doing as parents. Not when we were pregnant. Not when Libbie arrived. And, certainly not now, 6 years and three kids later. At the same time, we did what we could to prepare, we leaned on friends and family to support us, and when all else failed we tried our best. And, it's not always perfect. But, it has been life changing, so much so that now we can never turn back. Because we have been forever changed. I wonder if that is what Jesus is getting at with this parable. The fact that if we really want a place at that great wedding banquet, if we really want to partake of the feast and be a part of the festivities, we have to do a little more than just show up. Yes, as Jesus even argues, showing up is the first step, I mean we have to accept the invitation to go to the party. But, we also have to prepare, we have to get the wedding garment, or else we can't change (figuratively and literally). Just like parents preparing for the arrival of that first child, we won't know what it is like until we get there. At the same time in order to prepare, we will have to change the fabric of our entire lives. We will have to adopt a fabric made out of selfless giving, patient forgiveness, and unconditional love. A fabric that allows us to know peace in the midst of chaos, hope in spite of constant change, and love in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. This will become the fabric of our lives, when we take the invitation that is already in front of us, and put on the only garment that we have ever needed in order to be ready for the party of our lives.