

18 Pentecost A lectionary 28
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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
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Grace, mercy and peace to you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

The word “gospel” means “good news.” But today’s gospel does not sound like good news. The parable in this gospel features murders and retribution in the middle and ends with a wedding guest being kicked out of the banquet into “the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” To get the good news out of today’s gospel will require some wrestling. When we wrestle we have to use strength, wits and leverage. We have to be ready for surprises and, indeed, anticipate them. It will take all of a wrestler’s skills and tricks to get good news out of this gospel. So, like Jacob at the river Jabbok, we will have to wrestle with God in order to get a blessing out of this gospel.

This is a strange parable Jesus tells. It is one of the last parables Matthew records, one in a series of strange, awful parables. Here the first ones invited to the wedding banquet by the king spurn the invitation; some quite wickedly kill and harm the king’s slaves. The king has them destroyed, for disrespecting him and his invitation. We don’t quite know what to make of this, so we circle round, as wrestlers do. Then the king has other slaves issue other invitations. This time the ones invited are not honored guests, but anyone who is around. Matthew emphasizes, “both good and bad” are invited, this time. This is an unexpected move. The first ones invited, the honored ones, turned out to be bad. Perhaps the king no longer trusts his initial judgment of who is good and who is bad. For us, this is good news, this is gospel: whether we are good (maybe) or bad (plenty of that), we are welcome. We are guests at the feast. This is the part of the parable we like. We like being invited. We like being welcomed by the king. This is the grace we Lutherans are familiar with. God is gracious and merciful, even to sinners.

That is probably how Matthew’s original audience understood this parable. They knew they were the second ones invited, not the first. Matthew was a tax collector, scorned by the other Jews. Matthew had to touch Roman money and work with the Roman occupiers of Israel; so he was unable to follow all the Jewish laws. According to the scribes and Pharisees, he was one of the “bad” ones. So Matthew was grateful for an invitation that included the bad with the good. Matthew’s audience, the early Christians who were often regarded as “bad” by the more powerful Jews, were grateful, too, to be among those invited second. But we (as alert wrestlers) can’t help but notice that the wedding banquet was not such a great party for the one who didn’t change into a wedding robe. He was thrown out. That is not such a happy part for us to hear.

That.could.be.me. Those early Christians, when they heard this parable, probably thought it could be them, too. But we notice something else: when they heard the words “wedding robe,” perhaps they remembered the robe they wore at their baptism. For baptism is (and was, even in the early days of the church) the entrance to Holy Communion – and Holy Communion is the foretaste of the feast to come. Holy Communion is our glimpse, our momentary presence, at the wedding feast of Jesus, the Lamb. Now this is wrestling is getting complicated. We’re feeling a little off balance. Are some of us who are baptized going to get thrown out? Can we lose our baptismal robe, our baptismal grace?

Let’s think about how baptism is similar to weddings. There is love and grace. Special clothes, invited guests, promises made. The baptismal promises are to renounce the forces of evil, the devil and all his empty promises. We affirm our belief in God. We promise to bear witness to the faith we profess. In our rite of Affirmation of Baptism (also known as Confirmation), our confirmands make these specific promises: to live among God’s faithful people; to hear God’s Word and share in God’s Supper; to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed; to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ; and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. In baptism, God takes us as we are. Good and bad. Sinners in need

of God's grace. But God doesn't leave us there. God expects us to be changed by our baptism, by that outpouring of grace.

And shouldn't God expect us to be changed? To be thankful? To rejoice? Shouldn't God expect us to live up to our promises? When we are baptized into Christ, we put on Christ – like a garment. We are to become, in St. Paul's words, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable." Many are called to the banquet of grace – but few are chosen. For today's wrestling, I will suggest that few are chosen or few choose to become disciples. The word "disciple" means "learner." We are to be learners of God's ways, doers of God's ways. We have all received God's grace. But if we are to be disciples, we have to study God's ways. And train ourselves to live in those ways, as wrestlers train. We must train ourselves to be deeply thankful. Deeply rejoicing. Do you recall the scripture "No discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful"? (Hebrews 12:11) Those training for a wrestling season find themselves in pain. They devote time to their training that could be spent doing fun and easy things. Those in training are careful about what they eat. They spend their money on equipment and events that will enhance their goals. They talk about their training even when they are "on break." The discipline of being a disciple of Jesus can be painful, too. We give up the way we are used to being. We who wish to be disciples spend our time and energy cultivating peaceful hearts and speaking peaceful words. We give our money to God's church and other organizations that follow God's ways. We read God's words and try to figure out how to apply them to our lives. In words and deeds, we strive to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. It is not often easy. Often we fail. Then we fall into the saving net of God's grace, a complete rescue from the outer darkness. Yes, we try to wear the baptismal garment of Christ. To keep it always around us. To be so thankful for God's invitation to the feast of grace that we subject ourselves to the discipline of being bearers of grace to the world. Our Lord has given us reason to rejoice. May it be so! Amen