

Sermon – Speechless
Sunday, October 12, 2014
Scripture Readings –
Exodus 32:7-14, Matthew 22:1-3, 8-14
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Our first scripture reading, Exodus 32:7-14, acknowledges that the God who is like a mother and father to Israel, the God who taught them to walk and gave them the boundaries of the law also experiences a parent's anger. In the verses prior to today's scripture reading, while Moses is away at Mount Sinai finalizing the law the people have just received, there is a betrayal, led by Aaron, as the people create a graven image of the golden calf and worship it. God is furious and wants to destroy the Israelites. Moses serves as an advocate and mediator, convincing God to have a change of heart and mind based on God's character and integrity. Hear now God's Holy word.

7 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; 8 they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" 9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; 10 now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation." 11 But Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" 14 And the LORD repented of the evil which God thought to do to God's people.

In our second scripture reading, Matthew 22:1-3, 8-11, Jesus tells another parable about the kingdom of God. This is the third parable in response to the Scribes and Pharisees who challenge his authority. Through this simple story, Jesus reminds his followers that those who accept the invitation to the Messianic Feast, and take it lightly, disrespect the Host perhaps even more than those who do not accept the invitation. This is a reminder that there are expectations of those of us who take a place at the table. Hear now the Word of God as written in the Gospel of Matthew.

1 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, 3 and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come.

8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' 10 And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

The title of the sermon: Speechless

The text: *and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Matthew 22:12*

Let us pray. Gracious and perceptive God, thank you for loving us enough to hold us accountable. As we reflect together on your Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Let me begin by sharing a moment in my life, at a very early age, when I found myself speechless. I was in the seventh grade and the *new girl* in school. That combination already makes the situation interesting. Remember how self-conscious one feels in junior high...being *new* only heightened those feelings. This particular moment happened in late October during gym class. Because there was no gymnasium at the school, P.E. class took place on the playground. We were required to wear shorts so on these days the girls wore shorts under their skirts. Right before gym we would put on our coats, parade into the bathroom and slip off our skirts before joining our classmates outside.

On this particular chilly, fall afternoon the boys and girls were playing a somewhat vigorous game of volleyball. As often happened, when we got too warm—we would take off our coats and toss them on the ground. I will never know why I decided to take off my coat on that particular afternoon—I really wasn't that good at volleyball. But I did, and as soon as I turned around I was greeted with outrageous laughter by the entire class. In total disbelief, I looked down to discover I was standing in front of my peers wearing.... *a slip*—not a bad looking slip, but nonetheless a slip. You've heard the term 'your slipping' or 'it's snowing down south.' Well, I was slipping and it was snowing all over. My shorts were under my slip, which I forgot to remove. Needless to say, I was speechless.

What does one do at a moment like this? Either laugh or dig a hole... and I was standing on concrete.

Each of us, at one time or another, has found ourselves in situations when we are speechless. There are different reasons for becoming speechless—embarrassing times like my one I just shared. Sometimes we are speechless because we are overwhelmed by the seriousness of a situation and have no adequate words to speak. Sometimes we are speechless because we simply have nothing to say and we are wise enough to keep our mouths shut. Sometimes we are speechless because we are indignant at someone's incredibly bad timing on a comment or joke that is in poor taste, or we are shocked and embarrassed by someone else's inappropriate behavior.

The speechlessness in today's parable is more related to our own behavior. The shock or embarrassment is for one's self. A truth has been made known—the image we have been projecting as to who we are has been challenged. Someone has seen through our exterior and caught a glimpse of our inadequacies. We see ourselves more clearly through another person's eyes and it is not a pretty picture. We are speechless!

Just as the children of Israel were speechless when Moses returned from Mount Sinai to discover their infidelity in worshiping the golden calf...so is the man who accepts the invitation, yet does not put on the wedding garment.

Not unlike the Emperor in Hans Christian Anderson's satirical tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the man in today's parable finds himself strutting through the banquet in his underwear, with a pretense unbecoming to his host.

The message is clear and a little daunting to those of us who have also accepted the invitation. It is a not so subtle reminder that although saying "yes" to God's invitation is important—something more is needed!

Many have entered the debate on what that "something more" is! What is the wedding garment? How can we be sure we are wearing it? There were no known requirements or traditions in Palestine at this time about wearing a particular wedding garment.

However, the early Christian baptismal liturgy did include the imagery of putting on the clothes of Christ. When Paul says "Let us put on the clothes of Christ," he is encouraging us to take on Christ's character—justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. In the kingdom of God (at the messianic banquet) all the barriers, hostility and religious superiority are unraveled. There is a mandate to weave the new clothes of integrity, equality and respect into our lives. The man is speechless because he has no defense; he accepted the invitation of the gospel, but refused to put on the clothes of Christ.

And so although the definition of the "wedding garment" remains ambiguous—meaning it can be interpreted in more than one way; perhaps that's the manner in which we need to leave it because it is precisely the ambiguity that makes us sit up a little straighter and wonder about ourselves. Far be it for you and me to fall into the same religious trap of the Scribes and Pharisees—by becoming overconfident of our standing with God...and smug about the power of our own words or judgments about others. May we never assume too much familiarity in our relationship with Christ...or take for granted the invitation to be a part of God's banquet.

Jesus Christ left the religious world standing with its mouth open—"speechless" when he invited and welcomed all people into the kingdom of God...when he kept his mouth shut and absorbed the hostility of this world in his sacrificial death on the cross. When the costly gift of grace is taken too nonchalantly it becomes cheap and ceases to be grace at all. As people of faith, may we never believe this gift can be obtained easily through a simple formula or recitation of inadequate words without a change of heart, lifestyle and wardrobe.

By the grace of God, may we never find ourselves standing before our Creator, without a wedding garment, — speechless! Brothers and sisters, let us put on the clothes of Christ! Let us clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, self-control, and patience. Above all, let us clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in the rich tapestry of life. Amen.