

At a church conference in Omaha several years ago, people were given helium-filled balloons and instructed to release them at some point in the worship service when they felt joy in their hearts. All through the service, worshippers at various times would let loose their balloons and they would float upward to the ceiling. At the end of the service, however, it was discovered that the majority of people still had not released their balloon; evidence that these worshippers had apparently not experienced any joy at any point in their worship.

I wonder: If this experiment were repeated here this morning, in our worship today, how many of us would still be tightly holding onto our balloons as Hannah's postlude begins?

Like me, I'm sure many of you were taught and brought up to think of God's house as a place for extreme seriousness, a place to close one's eyes and pray – individually! - and silently, of course! Church was not a place of celebration, a place of happiness, a place where we can have fun. But the parable Jesus tells of the Royal Wedding Banquet in today's Gospel reading paints a very different picture. The Christian assembly is a gathering of those who are called to enjoy the Lord's party. The Lord invites us to a supper, a banquet, a feast. Can you imagine a wedding banquet in which everyone sits stone-faced, cold and quiet? That would indeed be a strange wedding feast! One to which most of us would not wish to be invited.

Jesus' parable shows us three possible kinds of guests . . .

First, there are the absentee guests – those who initially returned the RSVP card, accepted the invitation, and chose the salmon, chicken or beef entrée. But when the time comes to honor the invitation with their presence, they are nowhere to be found. The second group are the wedding guests without proper wedding attire, those who attend the feast but cannot be

troubled to take the trouble to prepare adequately for it, do not celebrate as the occasion deserves. And then there are the other guests, those with wedding garments who make the necessary preparation to present themselves fit for the banquet of their King.

The important thing we must notice about the absentee guests is that they are not portrayed as evil sinners. They were not engaged in sinful activity or bad behavior. In other words, they are much like most of us. One went to attend to his farm, another to his business. These are noble and gainful employments, nothing to be ashamed of or punished for. These guests remind us that sometimes, what keeps us away from the joy of God's Kingdom is not sin, but merely misplaced priorities, an unhealthy preoccupation and prioritization with the necessities of life. To be serious with your business, your vocation, your job is a good and admirable trait, but when your job – or anything else - becomes your number one priority and keeps you away from worshipping God, then it becomes an obstacle, a burden that hinders you from experiencing the joy of the Lord in your life. There is a saying that “the good is often the enemy of the best,” meaning that that which is inherently good can ultimately prevent us from knowing something even better. If only those absentee guests knew what they were missing by not attending the feast! It used to be that people attended church services to fulfill a “Sunday obligation,” to “get their ticket punched,” we might jokingly say. But this kind of fear is no longer a prime motivator in our society – and that is a good thing! – since fear of not attending should not be what brings us here today. More people might come to church if they knew they were missing out on the joy of celebrating and feasting with others of the Christian community. But sadly, too many faith communities are not places of obvious joy. Indeed, many of us are left still clutching our balloons as the service ends. And we must ask ourselves: What message does that send to those who may wish to join us?

Regarding the guest without the wedding garment: To speculate, as many biblical commentaries have done and many preachers will do this morning . . . to speculate on whether he had enough time to go home and put on his wedding garment, or whether he was too poor to own a wedding garment, or propose some other reason why he isn't dressed appropriately – all these

are beside the point. The point of the parable is this: If you choose to go to the dance, you must wear your dancing shoes! If you choose to go to a wedding, dress for an occasion of joy! By not wearing a wedding garment, this guest signaled that while he was physically present in the party, his mind and spirit were not there. While he was physically in the feasting hall, he was clearly not in the mood for feasting. Jesus criticizes this hypocritical attitude. In fact, as the parable teaches, it is better not to attend at all than to be present, but not fully present. The invitation is to all . . . the party, the banquet, the feast is free for all . . . yet anyone who decides to attend has a responsibility to present themselves fit for the occasion and the King's company.

The Kingdom of God is freely offered to each and every one of us. And those of us on the way to the Kingdom must spare no effort in acquiring the moral and spiritual and faithful character that is in keeping with life in God's heavenly, eternal Kingdom. In other words, if you anticipate and desire eternal life in the Kingdom of God, dress yourself appropriately in this life with compassion, mercy, grace, justice, mercy and love. Expect to experience and come prepared to actively participate in the joy of the occasion, the joy of being in the presence of the King of Heaven, and God's Son, the bridegroom.

Which brings us to the final group, those guests who gratefully accept the invitation and attend the wedding feast, taking care to appear appropriately dressed for the joyous occasion. Of the three groups, they are the only ones who are truly engaged in the moment, have fun, and thoroughly enjoy the party. These are the models whose example we should follow. Today's Gospel sends a message to those who, for whatever reason, stay away from the Lord's Banquet, those who avoid the Supper we celebrate as we come and gather together around this table, those who are missing out on the joy of life this altar offers. To those of us who have accepted the invitation to come to the Lord's Feast, this parable warns us not to take God's grace for granted, but to clean ourselves up and come prepared to worship joyfully in God's presence.

The message of this morning's Gospel is the same as we read in Paul's Letter to the Colossians: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Then prepare to release your balloon, signaling to all the joy you experience in attending the feast at the Lord's Table.

Amen.