

Have you ever had one of those work dreams where you have to give a speech but can't find it? My recurring nightmare, even though it doesn't make sense, is that I will be at a service and not know where I am supposed to sit. The ending of today's gospel reminds me of these. A guest, issued a last-minute invitation, turns up to a wedding banquet wearing all the wrong clothes and gets cast into the outer darkness by his irate host. On the surface, it makes little sense.

Until we consider the times and the customs of the day. You see I've been reading that the host would have offered the appropriate clothing to this guest and the problem would have gone away. What seems to have happened in this parable is that the guest has made the choice to remain in his own clothes, to "come as you are" instead of come prepared properly for the celebration at hand.

The celebration is meant to invoke the heavenly banquet, the celestial entrance into the kingdom of God, and a certain amount of preparation is expected. If the king is hosting a wedding banquet for his son, we should probably think Jesus, then, minimally, those gaining entrance should have already claimed Jesus as Lord and endeavored to follow in his ways. Not "come as you are" but "come as you have been transformed," and being closely aligned with the ways of God: justice, peace, inclusion, and love of all.

What is it about God that calls us to worship, to share in this heavenly meal, to aspire to life in God's kingdom even now, week after week, and allowing ourselves to be formed and changed into the very people God created us, in God's image, to be?

The prophet Isaiah helps us to know God as a "refuge for to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat," the one who will "wipe away the tears from all the faces" which is essentially everything life throws our way. This is the God who created us and loves us unconditionally, whom we worship. And it is Jesus, God incarnate, who shows us God and the way in which to follow.

We do need to be careful, though, because not all brands of Christianity are created equal. "Beware of false prophets," Jesus warned his disciples and that warning is just as critical today. Following the God of love means being people who love. When we are told, in the name of Jesus, that some are not worthy of God's love, will be excluded from God's kingdom, and should be isolated or expelled from our own communities, well, then, we are hearing the voice of those false prophets Jesus warned about.

Isaiah, and all the other prophets we have been hearing from in the past few weeks, both echo and foreshadow Jesus: if it is not about love, it is not about God, merciful, loving, and just.

If Isaiah points the way to the who of the God we worship, Jesus' parable points to why because he sets before us the very real contrast between the ways of the world in which we live and the ways of God, the kingdom of God, which is how we were created to live.

I believe God came to live among us in the person Jesus to show us the way because we had failed to see all the other ways God had endeavored to show us. Here, in the parable of the wedding banquet, those first invited, the ones we would expect to get the invitations, the Pharisees and scribes, religious leaders ordained by God, refused the invitation. Life, apparently for them, was

going just fine. Who needs the kingdom of God when the kingdoms of the world are serving up all the power and authority they needed. And so, they are judged unworthy. And, those the world would judge most unworthy, the tax collectors and sinners, take their place. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

I've heard it said that once cast out of the Garden of Eden, the perfection of God's creation, through human sin, we are constantly trying to get back there. Repent and return to the Lord is the often-repeated cry of the ancient prophets. If the prophets paint a picture of who God is, and Jesus offers entrance into God's kingdom, we see in Paul's letter to the Philippians, the way in which to get there.

"Stand firm," in the face of false prophets. "Rejoice in the Lord always," and let the world see your kindness and gentleness toward one another. Love God who loves you unconditionally. Love your neighbor just as unconditionally.

"Finally, beloved" Paul concludes, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

We are all invited to the wedding banquet. How we clothe ourselves in kindness, mercy, justice, and love is the preparation that matters. The world is often the largest false prophet of all and is constantly and relentlessly tempting us to embrace its ways of judgment, power, riches, and control.

Which invitation will we accept? The choice matters and we will, in some ways, someday, surely answer for the choices we make today.