*"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, `Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, `Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." Matthew 22:11-14*

PLEASE. BE SEATED.

A close family friend, Grace, has had a great deal of hip pain, for many months now. Physical therapy has done little to improve it. So, a few weeks ago they finally ordered an MRI of her hip, expecting to see the need for a hip replacement. Not something Grace was looking forward to, to say the least, but she had prepared herself for the news—thought of how we, her friends, and her family could get her through the first few weeks when she wouldn’t be mobile. As the doctor went over her MRI results with her, though, she learned that her hip is actually functioning quite well. “Fantastic!” I said, as we spoke over the phone that evening, a Friday. “Well,” she said. “Maybe not. What is causing the pain, they think, is a mass on my pelvic bone. They want to do a contrast CT to see if they can visualize the tumor better, and they want a whole-body bone scan done to see if there are tumors anywhere else. Monday.” “Oh,” I said. “Yeah.” She got weepy. Cancer. It could be cancer. Grace began to cry. “I won’t get to go to heaven with my kids.”

This was Grace’s most immediate thought at the possibility of her death. Were I to have opened up to our Gospel parable from today and read it to her, I have no doubt that she would have passed right over the message of liberation inherent in the open invitation to all of the townspeople—the marginalized included. Instead, Grace would have gone straight to seeing herself as the speechless man, bound hand and foot, and thrown into outer darkness.

When Luke tells this same parable, these last verses are not included. Actually, Luke includes no military response either, in contrast to Matthew who has those who initially decline the invitation destroyed. In Luke’s account, after inviting the “poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,” the Master simply says, “For I tell you, none of those who were [originally] invited will taste my dinner.”

It is in Matthew’s telling of the parable where all of the hellfire and brimstone enters in. And it is Matthew’s account that many of us, like Grace, remember. As I think back on the pain and fear in Grace’s voice, I am angry with Matthew for these differences.

As I prepared this sermon, I fought hard to see any real liberation in Matthew’s version of the parable. I wrestled and analyzed, trying with all of my intellect to find the “Good News.” After all of the hardship, the suffering, the trying just to get through each day, this guy could get kicked out for not wearing a robe to a banquet he’d never been told about until now? Those of us who see ourselves in him, after all our struggle, after lives of feeling “less than” and often helpless, will be turned away by God at the end of time—the metaphorical “banquet”-- because we just aren’t *quite* good enough?

BIG PAUSE.

And then, I stopped. I stopped trying to make sense of it. I stopped wrestling and analyzing. Instead, I let it wash over me in my moments of prayer. I let all of the questions simply be questions without answers.

As I did that, it was not a harsh, exacting, distant God, ticking off my successes and failures that I was invited to dine with at the most extravagant banquet, but Jesus, and Jesus’ parent, each my own loving, intimate God. Jesus, who, earlier in this very Gospel promises in the Beatitudes that the Kingdom is already here, though not yet fully—that those who are in pain, those who are afraid, those who have been told by parents and teachers, employers and spouses, governments and even the Church that they have no worth—will be blessed—will be given a VIP ticket to the Banquet.

It is Jesus, too, with whom Grace is invited to dine. Grace, a victim of emotional abuse at the hands of her own parents—convinced since she was a little girl that it would have been better had she not been born, that she is unlovable. She, and all of us who find a piece of ourselves in her story, even in what we worry is the wrong robe, will be invited, *have already been invited*, to dine with Jesus.

There was so much about this parable that hadn’t made sense to me when I was initially pouring over it. At least someone walking into that banquet with his or her robes on must have noticed this guy walking along without his. So, they must not have said anything—not one of them offered him an extra robe? Maybe they were too afraid about how he would react. Or worse, maybe they were actually looking forward to seeing this guy get it handed to him for being unprepared, patting themselves on the back for being “better” than he. Why would God let *those* people stay at the banquet? Their actions seem far more immoral than the man who was unprepared.

My times in prayer with this passage broadened my thinking a bit. What if the robe is not firstly a near-perfect, moral life, as Matthew intends it to be, but instead, the acceptance of our certain identities as God’s own children? Here, the robe is transformed from an instrument of fear and guilt into our own belovedness in the eyes of Christ, Father/Mother, and Spirit. With this perspective, the robe we are expected to wear to dine with Jesus is the assurance of our own inherent self-worth—our right to exist; the gifts of our existence to each other, to Creation, to God; our selves as deserving of love. To me, this parable begins to make sense.

Perhaps, instead of the way I described it earlier, the walk to the banquet hall really went like this: This guy was walking through the streets, in his regular street clothes, people were streaming by him, each with a fancy robe on. An old man came up, gently patted his shoulder, and offered him an extra robe—“you’re going to need this,” he said. But the guy shook him off, “no thanks, I got this on my own, man, keep out of my business.” Or, maybe, humbled, he said, “oh no, I couldn’t. Thank you, though.” Either way, someone in his walk through the streets tried to get him to put a robe on, and he wouldn’t.

This man is Grace—I know Grace’s story well— She was a social worker, giving of herself week in and week out for children living on the margins with mental illness. When you ask her about this, she will tell you her work was completely selfishly-motivated to make herself feel good. Her amazing children have tried their lives long to love her so intensely, in just the right way, that she would accept her own worthiness of it. She has had two husbands who have reached out, loved her in different ways. She has gone to Church, been moved deeply by God, and then turned away in anticipation of being abandoned. The robe of her own belovedness has been offered to Grace countless times, and she will not put it on. Her husbands, her children, her friends, her colleagues can all hand her the robe—but they cannot put it on for her. She must do that herself. As must each of us.

To me, this is the only way the parable makes sense. If the parable is a metaphor for the “final banquet”—eternal life with God—it can’t be full of a bunch of competitive, selfish people. It must be filled with God’s beloved—who are relishing our belovedness—letting it take us over with joy and unbounded generosity. Belovedness is incompatible with overlooking the suffering around us, or waiting for others to fail—it finds its true voice only in boldly proclaiming the belovedness of not only ourselves, but also of *all others*.

Our parable today ends with these words, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Chosenness, then, seems to me, to be not an act of God, but of each of us. God has called, *we* must choose. We must choose to put the robe on—to live as the beloved of God that each of us is. It matters, not only to ourselves and to each other, but to the world, and to God. For, we cannot offer another a robe—we cannot do the work of God that we are called to do, fighting to make the assurance of the belovedness of all people manifest in their liberation from poverty, oppression, and neglect, unless we have our *own* robe on.

Put on *your* robe, carry extras with you, and journey to the Banquet.

AMEN.