

Yr. A, Proper 23  
October 15, 2023  
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan  
Christ Episcopal Church  
1673 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 25:1-9  
Psalm 23  
Philippians 4:1-9  
Matthew 22:1-14

1977 was—*how do I say this*—an unfortunate year in the world of fashion. Those of you who were *part of that debacle*—you know who you are! The unluckiest among us have our wardrobes captured forever in high school or college yearbook photographs.

1977 was the year John Travolta took the stage in the movie, *Saturday Night Fever*, wearing a white polyester suit, and an unbuttoned shirt with an *enormous collar*, spread out nice and wide across the top of his jacket lapel. More on this later...

We are now in our third week of eavesdropping upon the intense, verbal exchanges between our Lord, Jesus Christ and the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Now, I'm going to stop right here to make a really important announcement: In this present age of growing anti-Semitism, it is critical for preachers to say, and for Christian people to understand—with absolute clarity—that Jesus never condemned the Jewish people. Jesus was *fully* Jewish—keeping the faith, honoring the Law, and maintaining absolute, unswerving loyalty to the LORD, the Almighty One.

In fact, it was because Jesus *so loved* his Jewish neighbors that he became *so sharply critical* of the religious and Roman authorities who abused and oppressed them. Jesus rebuked the arrogant, greedy leaders who acted as if *they* had 'cornered the market' on God's grace and mercy.

Just as his mother, Mary, sang out loud in her prayer<sup>1</sup>: Jesus *scatters* the proud, brings *down* the mighty, and lifts up the lowly...every time he speaks and acts!

My family's longtime pastor did a wonderful thing not long after my dad died...even though, years earlier, this pastor had moved to a new congregation in Texas. The Rev. Dr. Lacoste Munn invited my mom (and 11-year-old me) to join a group from his church on a trip to the Holy Land, *and*...it involved a cruise ship.

If you lived in Barnwell in 1977, and accepted an invitation for a fancy cruise, you pretty much drove to Columbia to buy the right clothes. God bless my mama—*she*...bought **me**...a white, polyester suit! Don't get me wrong—this was *not* in honor of John Travolta. We were Baptists! We had *nothing to do* with any so-called, Saturday Night Fever!

My light blue shirt may have had a huge collar, but it was buttoned all the way to the top, and accented with a shiny, blue-and-white-striped polyester tie. I was going to be dressed to the nines for the all-you-can-eat buffet on that ship!

Two weeks ago, we heard the first story Jesus told to the religious leaders calling them out for being "all talk and no action" when it comes to following God's will. And *we know* what God's will *is*—it's recorded over and over in the writings of the prophets, like Isaiah, whom we just heard.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary's Prayer, The Magnificat, is found in the Gospel according to St. Luke (1:47-55). In it, she describes how the LORD cares deeply for the poor and vulnerable who suffer under the tyranny of arrogant, powerful rulers.

“(You, O LORD,) have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.” The promise of the prophet, Isaiah, is that the oppressed, the abused, and the neglected will eventually receive what God intends for *all peoples*...namely, “a feast of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” And then, Isaiah says, “God will destroy the shroud (of darkness and terror) that is spread over all the nations. The LORD will swallow up death *forever*, AND...our LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces.”

Isaiah’s vision of God’s merciful will is *so deep...and...so wide*...that nobody is left out. Boy, that’s comforting...*and it’s also challenging*, isn’t it?

Isaiah’s prophesy is a promise of peace and comfort for the holy innocents, the victims of violence in Israel. Isaiah’s prophesy is *also* a vision of peace for *other* holy innocents, victims of violence in Gaza, Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Mexico, and in our *own* American cities and towns...*everywhere* that innocent people suffer from unceasing violence. Isaiah speaks up for all nations...all peoples...all faces that are drenched with tears.

Last week, Jesus *called out* the religious leaders, *yet again*. He told a *second story* of how these arrogant, greedy, people-in-charge had violently rejected the prophets sent by God to speak challenging truths about justice and peace. *And*, Jesus predicted, “You’re about to kill me, the Son of God.” It was a ‘mic drop’ moment, and those powerful men wanted *nothing more* than to arrest Jesus on the spot. Their tenuous grip on power meant that our *outspoken Jesus* had to be *silenced*.

There’s a picture in an old photo album of me sitting in a dimly lit dining room, holding a soft drink, and wearing a big smile on my face. It’s not an exaggeration to confess that my white suit lit up the room! But it was okay, y’all, because *everybody* was dressed up, too. We all fit in at the banquet. Everybody on board was *invited*. Everybody on board was *included*. And it was simply wonderful...*magical*. Most of us in that grand banquet hall had never experienced anything like it.

And this, *of course*, makes me think of this third story Jesus told the religious leaders in today’s Gospel lesson. It’s a story that begins with grace and then shifts to judgment...judgment of the arrogant, greedy, and violent leaders among the people.

It’s *essential* to remember who Jesus is talking to here. He is *not* talking to his disciples. He is *not* talking to his regular Jewish neighbors. He’s talking to the people who are *this close* to taking him out! Today’s story is all about...*them*. And, *mercifully*, I believe it is *for them*, as well. Perhaps there were one or two guys working in the Temple, maybe newcomers to that privileged role, who *might just* change their minds...and follow the way of love that Jesus proclaims.

And so, he says, “The Kingdom of heaven is like...a king who throws a wonderful, *magical* party for his beloved son.” And it’s a free invitation! All you have to *do* is show up. Grace, grace, grace, grace, grace!

Unless you’re arrogant, selfish, and you reject the invitation...*which*—by the way—opens the opportunity to everybody in the street...good people, and—*here’s another miracle*—bad people! Let that *sink in*—just how gracious and merciful our King really is! Literally, *everyone* is invited to *be his guest*...except for some dude who was not wearing a wedding robe.

For *him*, there is harsh judgment—*poor guy*. Our minds are racing through the possibilities. “Maybe he didn’t have time to *find* a wedding robe,” we wonder. “Maybe he couldn’t afford to *buy* a wedding robe,” we fret.

Biblical scholars have debated all sorts of ideas for 2000 years. Many of those theories operate from an assumption that he was underdressed. Well, I have a question: What if the problem is that he was overdressed?

I came home from the Mediterranean cruise with that mighty fine suit in my luggage...and not even one ketchup stain. All the glitz! All the glamour! But here's the thing. It was way too much in Barnwell—too much for Sunday morning Church...too much for Saturday night birthday parties, even if there were disco balls spinning from the ceiling. To *overdress* for those occasions would have been saying, "It's all about me."

And I believe that was *precisely* the problem with the arrogant, greedy, violent religious leaders who wanted to kill Jesus. They were acting *as if* the Kingdom of God was all about *them*.

Our clue? It comes from the Gospel according to St. Luke—the *other place* where Jesus talks about clothing worn by the religious leaders. "(Oh how) they *love* to walk around in long robes," Jesus says... "and have the places of honor at banquets. Beware of them, for they devour widows' houses!" In other words, they abuse and oppress the most poor and *vulnerable* people in Israel.

So, I believe the *poor guy* in today's parable who gets thrown out...he was not poor *after all*. He was rich. He was important. And he wanted to be *sure* that EVERYONE at that wedding banquet knew it. He dressed up in order NOT to fit in as one of the many *thankful guests*.

And that's a problem, because *he* was NOT the *King*. Neither was he the beloved *Son of the King*. He was just a guest, *like everyone else*. And the proper response for fortunate guests of a heavenly banquet...is to show up...with humble gratitude...and fit in.

Jesus told this parable to powerful leaders who did NOT fit in because—in *their arrogance*—they *refused* to fit in. They were unwilling to accept an invitation that would bring them—equitably and peaceably alongside all the other invited *guests*.

To be sure, the Kingdom of heaven does not preclude *having* a white, polyester suit. It just means knowing when to wear it...in order to fit *in*...And when *not to wear it* as a way to put oneself *above* everyone else.

I would like to conclude with a special blessing for you because it '*fits in*' so perfectly with these lessons which *both comfort and challenge us*, especially at a time with so much division, strife, and violence. And I did not write this blessing, St. Paul did. It's just timeless!

Rejoice, dear people, because *our LORD* is gracious and merciful to **all people**. I mean it—rejoice! *And*...let your gentleness as a child of God be obvious to *everyone*. Don't worry about all the things which are beyond your control; just keep praying with your humble, thankful heart.

The peace of God *will surround you* and protect you on every side. Devote your gifted minds to the truth, to all that is honorable, just, and commendable. Choose praise-*worthy* thoughts...and words...and deeds. Dwell on *these forms* of excellence. And the God of peace—the King of heaven, the Host of the wonderful, magical, heavenly banquet—will be with us all, evermore.<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> A paraphrase of St. Paul's exhortation in today's reading from his letter to the Philippians.