

This past May was the wedding of my niece Katelyn. This was the first wedding of the next generation of the Nagel clan and an event that was anticipated with great joy. I would at last get to preside over a family wedding! The wedding took place down in Tempe, Arizona because Katelyn (and her husband Javier) had been FOCUS missionaries at Arizona State University, and the wedding took place at the Newman Center where they had met and ministered together.

I had arranged to fly out of Payne Field with my sister Lisa, and brother-in-law, Bill, the day before the wedding. I thought I had packed carefully. But just as I drove up to Lisa's house to catch a ride to the airport – it suddenly dawned on me. I had forgotten to pack my suit! Argh! Here I was, the presiding priest, uncle of the bride, and all I had were old, faded short-sleeved clerical shirt and pants. Not that I'm a fancy dresser, but I know that you dress up for a

wedding. The reception would be especially mortifying. But there was nothing to be done at that point.

My family all reassured me that it would be fine. Few would notice and none would care. “You’re a priest! Style expectations are very low.” And, in fact, that is how it turned out. The wedding was joyous – a beautiful and deeply Catholic ceremony, followed by an elegant reception – with everyone but me in suits and dresses. And it didn’t matter a bit. We all had great fun.

And that is how we expect and want the parable of the wedding banquet in the gospel today to conclude. We want the parable to end with God throwing the party open to everyone – even the guy who forgot his suit. But that’s not what we get! Far from it. “My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?’ But he was reduced to silence, Then the King said to the attendants, ‘Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.’” What in the world

is going on here? Surely, God is at least as forgiving as my family was with me!

We must remember that when Jesus speaks in parables, there is symbolism and context. For instance, verse 7, about the king sending his troops to destroy the city, probably reflects the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. And the parable is spoken to the Chief Priests and Pharisees. They knew about the coming of the Messiah – they had been invited to God’s wedding banquet – but when it was time to celebrate – when the King sent out His messengers/servants saying, “It’s time!” – think here of John the Baptist foretelling Jesus’ arrival -- they refused to come to the wedding – that is, accept Jesus as Messiah. So, God, the King, opened the party of heaven – that great wedding feast -- to everyone, good and bad alike. And in Matthew’s Gospel that means the tax collectors, prostitutes, etc. God really does invite everyone to Him. So far, so good.

But what about that man without the wedding garment? It sounds very unfair. If these people had been herded into the party, where would they get the garment and when would they have time to change? This expulsion seems exactly like the kind of worldly values the Gospel rejects.

But parables don't always work as logically as literary short stories. They are filled with symbols. And here with the highlighting of this garment Jesus wants to make a crucial point: God expects us to change if we want to celebrate in heaven! That is not a popular teaching, perhaps. But it's basic to Jesus' message. In fact, this conversion, repentance, change, is referred to in Scripture as "putting on Christ." Here is Paul teaching the Romans (13:14), "Let us throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the

flesh.” And Galatians 3:26 – 27: “Through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

It isn't only a matter of leaving sin behind. It's also a call for making one's own, the beauty of Jesus' person and life. This is the wedding garment – for the wedding of Jesus and the soul. The disciple is to put on this wedding garment – the dress of heaven. In this way, we are to impersonate Jesus. That word “impersonate” has, for us, a negative connotation – deceptive, fake. But break it down for this context. In the spiritual life we are to im-person-ate: put the Person of Jesus in/on ourselves. That's holiness, union with Jesus – and there is no place in the heavenly banquet hall without it.

This is the point this parable insists upon. Yes, everyone has been invited to the banquet no matter how sinful or poor we are. But we all must also change. Heaven is the kingdom of truth, love, justice, and mercy. And if we don't want to put them on ourselves

then we're saying we don't want heaven. Sin can have no place there. Jesus' wedding garment, in the end, isn't like my forgotten black suit at all – just fabric and social symbol. The wedding garment of Heaven is . . . Jesus Himself. And putting Him on IS the actual wedding that each person is invited to. It's our own wedding! – eternity as one with God. It is the point of life. It's either the light and warmth inside – or the darkness outside – Heaven or Hell. That may still not be a popular or comfortable reading of the parable, but it's the truth, and Jesus wants all His disciples to understand it.