

Proper 23
Matthew 22.1-14
The Rev. Chip Graves

Wedding banquets are great, a special day where two are joined in holy matrimony before God, family and friends. But as we saw in today's gospel sometimes there's an unexpected twist. Roger, a mid-40's newly ordained priest and good friend of mine was about to celebrate his first wedding ceremony. As a neophyte priest, he'd assisted at a wedding beforehand, but he'd never done it solo. *The big day*, he thought; his nerves were on high alert. *What if I say the wrong prayer; or what if I forget to announce the hymns? So many things to remember.* Roger's silent prayer the week beforehand became, *please Lord, don't let me screw up. Just get me through this.*

The big day came. With the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of southern Virginia in the background, white laced table tops and white lilies galore the setting for this wedding was picture perfect. And the ceremony went extremely well; no mistakes. Roger was elated. Now he could relax. All was done. As he dismissed the congregation, he headed toward the groom to congratulate him. With newly gained confidence, he stuck out his hand, *Congratulations*, he said. *I know you two will have a wonderful life together. So, how's it feel to be married?*

The young man to whom he'd been speaking looked at the ground awkwardly; and with a sheepish grin responded, *Thanks.....but I'm not the groom. I'm his younger brother.....He's over thereyou know, the fella next to the bride.* Horrified and turning three shades of red, Roger couldn't believe it; he'd mistaken the groom for his younger brother. Unable to make eye contact, Roger slowly escaped into the crowd.

Our gospel today ends with a terrifying phrase, *many are called but few are chosen.* But let's not stop there. Matthew places this wedding banquet narrative as the last of three parables, eventually to focus on final judgment. The first parable mentions the two sons, alluding to John the Baptist as one who came but was not supported. The second parable describes the Lord's vineyard, given to others, tenants who killed the son and foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion. Each parable hammers once again the same theme. We just don't get it; over and over again God has revealed to us the path to his kingdom. The bottom line is that we don't follow God's roadmap – to love God and to love our neighbor. *Are we so blind?*

Matthew places our wedding banquet in historical context, deeply rooted in Rabbinic and Hellenistic tradition. The king's invitation is sent well in advance of the banquet; and then again a follow-up reminder. Matthew's allegorical play on Israel's rejection of the Word comes after God's people had bought into God's covenant. Therefore our gospel begs the question, *will the people of God (Israel), will they be chosen?* Placed in a more contemporary context.....*will we be chosen?*

It is quite frankly disturbing to hear the last two verses of our gospel, tying up and then throwing the wedding guest outside into darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth. *All this for not wearing the appropriate wedding garment?* Perhaps I should start watching the hit TV show, *What Not to Wear*. Matthew's allusion to proper attire is all about being clothed in righteousness and accepting the word of God through Christ. Simply put, accept Christ in your life and you get to stay at the banquet. *But what does this mean today, in this world? What are we to do?*

I found the answer in Ruby, an 80 year old patient at Arlington Hospital just outside of Washington DC three years ago. She personifies the perfect wedding guest at God's banquet, adorning the proper wedding garment. She truly lives out the gospel message each and every day. I had the privilege of meeting Ruby, a retired teacher, as I was recuperating from a minor injury. I was in room 407; she was just a few doors down. Ruby changed my life; she may change yours. Ruby was beautiful, her dark skin enveloping those big beautiful brown eyes, ever sparkling like stars on a wintry night. And her voice. Yes, her voice was low with a slight crackle but very smooth and buttery.

Ruby had been in and out of the hospital for several years. "*A heart condition*" she'd tell you. But she'd never dwell it. "*No time for that*", she'd say. "*Too much to do around here. Too many people to see.*" I was fascinated with Ruby and her ability to light up the room. Ruby was special; one of those rare characters that you encounter; one of those characters you never forget. Some people say there are angels among us. This angel was Ruby. As Jesus reveals in Matthew 10, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops," And she did.

The remarkable thing about Ruby was her love for other patients and her sharing the gospel with them. Here she was at death's door, a lingering heart condition that would not let go; and yet she never complained, not one peep. Her small aged hands trembled as she'd gently pat your shoulder in comfort, letting you know she loved you and everything would be all right. And her wide smile disclosing perfectly white teeth, exuding a joyous spirit, filled with God. Simply put, in her presence, you knew that you were loved.....unconditionally. As scripture reveals in Mt. 10, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." And she did.

When I left the hospital, fully recuperated from my injury, I realized that it was not modern medicine but Ruby who cured me. Within this story, there is no 'right overcomes wrong', no 'good conquers evil'; but instead a glowing presence of God. And her name was Ruby. When in Ruby's presence you quickly realized why she had been chosen by God to share the Word. You knew immediately that her priorities were God, family and neighbor. That's it. This short list of priorities sums up her theology. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."(Mt. 22.34-40). And she did.

She put God and others before herself. And she never took God's blessings for granted. She lived her life praising God and loving others. There are countless stories of Ruby and

what she gave up so that those around her would be in a better place. I came to realize what made her so special, personifying God's intention of the righteous guest at the wedding banquet. Ruby truly believes in God and lives out the gospel in her every-day life, constantly giving love to those around her. In essence, she embodies the declaration of our gospel lesson today, *many are called but few are chosen*.
Amen.