

Matt Jacobson  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 October 2020  
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR A, PROPER 23  
PHILIPPIANS 4:4–13; PSALM 23; MATTHEW 22:1–14

On Friday after the noonday Mass, I was in my office gathering my things together, still in a post-Eucharistic state of bliss. I looked out the window at a pair of pigeons that had been there all morning. Before the Mass, I had watched them groom each other's feathers. Now, some other pigeons stopped by for what appeared to be a bit of a pigeon party. But, there was no social distancing.

That was enough to snap me out of it and bring me back to the present, back to the pandemic. It was time to walk home. Armed with my mask and some Purell in my pocket, I felt like a soldier going into battle as I left St. Mary's.

Almost immediately, as I looked left, I saw a woman a couple doors down without a mask, just beyond the garbage can with the public service announcement: "Don't be afraid of anyone." Then I heard her coughing. It's OK. By that point, I was already somewhere in the middle of 46<sup>th</sup> Street having made sure I was nowhere near her.

I went up 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, where several non-socially distanced workers were painting a bike lane. I could smell the paint and wondered what else was getting through my mask. My paranoia level only increased.

I hoped for relief when I got to the park, but there was a woman singing at the top of her lungs walking up and down a path, near lots of people. I almost lost it and went over to yell at her about how much further the virus can travel when you sing, but then realized raising my voice with her would also increase the distance of my own respiratory particles. So instead, due in part to the placement of some fencing, I walked about a football field length out of my way to avoid her.

As I emerged from the park, I saw a woman wearing a mask, a plastic face shield, and what appeared to be rubber dishwashing gloves. She was zigging and zagging down the sidewalk, doing her best to avoid everyone. Finally, here was somebody on my team, another brave soldier out battling the world.

It was us versus the rest of them. That said, I still didn't go anywhere near her.

To be clear, I'm not necessarily recommending my level of paranoia, though we ought to be taking reasonable safety precautions. But, I do offer my sympathies to anyone else that may be able to relate to my approach. Sympathies -- because I've never felt more distant from the world and from other people than during the pandemic. At times, I've noticed, it also relates to feeling distant from God.

There's a lot of "us versus them" in our society right now. That's probably the one thing most can agree upon. Unfortunately, for me, the pandemic has only exacerbated it. The problem of "us versus them" is nothing new. Think of that nasty serpent in Genesis who sowed division from the very beginning, positioning Adam and Eve against God.<sup>1</sup> What "us versus them" isn't ultimately a turning away from God?

There's a bit of an "us versus them" trap in the parable Jesus tells in today's gospel. And, it certainly would make the serpent happy if we fell into it! It's easy to interpret those that were initially invited to the wedding feast, but refused to come, as referring to all of the Jews.<sup>2</sup>

They may have been God's chosen people at one time, in the past, but then they rejected his invitation and didn't come to the wedding. No. That's not it. That kind of thinking belongs with the serpent.

The author of this gospel, Matthew, is probably best described as a Jewish follower of Jesus. The finger here is almost certainly being pointed at the chief priests and Pharisees to whom Jesus is speaking, representing those fellow Jews that disagreed with Matthew's understanding of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

And, while it certainly has all the tension of an "us versus them" moment, there's no reason to think that's what Jesus wants. He's not looking for anyone to reject his invitation, even if many did and continue to do so.

Then, there are those that do accept the invitation and go to the feast. But, one man doesn't have the proper wedding garment and is thrown out. So it's natural to wonder, what does this wedding garment represent metaphorically?

But, I'm also asking myself: why do I want to know? Is it to draw closer to God or because I want to know who is in and who is out? Who was that guest that showed up without the proper outfit and was tossed out? What was his problem?

St. Augustine, in an interpretation later writers also follow, says the wedding garment represents love.<sup>4</sup> Without the motivation to teach us about the love of God and neighbor, according to Augustine, there was no reason for Jesus to have even become our neighbor in the first place. In fact, he writes that it is so central to Jesus' mission, that anyone that doesn't love is effectively denying Christ's incarnation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 308.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 20-22, 305.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 90.6*; Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies 38.9*

<sup>5</sup> Tarsicius J. Van Bavel, "Love", in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 510.

Augustine describes three reasons to love one's neighbor.<sup>6</sup> The first is a bit philosophical in that we ought to do so because all humans share the same nature. The next is rather straightforward: because God commands it. A good reason. I'm partial to Augustine's third reason: it's a response to God's presence inside all of us.

Creation is so intertwined with its Creator, Augustine describes, that nobody loves one's neighbor without also loving God. And, we come to the love of God through a path that begins with the love of our neighbor.<sup>7</sup>

It's no wonder I've felt distant from God at times lately, as I've been doing my best to distance myself from all my neighbors. Of course, this will pass, though I hope not to forget it.

Turning back to the parable, it seems as though it's enough for us to think about what the garment may be and really not so important for us to figure out who is wearing one and who isn't. Maybe, if we want to go deeper into the parable, we should think about dressing like the servants. They seem to be following the king's instructions pretty well. They go out and invite everyone on behalf of the king, without any sort of discrimination about who ought to be there and who should be kept out.

"They gather all whom they found, both bad and good," we're told. There's no "us versus them". They invite everyone.

Some people may choose not to come or not to put on the wedding garment. But, that's their choice. It certainly doesn't seem to be the servant's job to figure it out.

Parables are never perfect representations for what they describe or point to. The King isn't just like the Father and the king's son doesn't fully describe Jesus. Metaphors help, but words can't ever contain God.

And, as best as I can tell, we the Church aren't always perfect reflections of the servants in today's parable either. Though, in this case, I'm not sure that it is entirely the language of the parable that comes up short. But, that also gives us something to work on.

It's essentially what Augustine is saying is the point of the incarnation: for us to learn to love our neighbor and therefore God. It's what God is calling us to continue to live into, even if we won't find ourselves fully reflecting the servant until we ourselves are at God's banquet.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 512.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.