

Overcoming Embarrassment

This should come as no surprise to anyone, but calling yourself a Christian in this day and age is a dangerous thing to do. Such a confession carries all kinds of negative baggage. What's more, as political tensions continue to rise in this country, hostility toward the Christian viewpoint has gone from bad to worse. Instead of standing steadfast and absorbing the blows, though, most Christians apologize for their beliefs. But there's a reason for our hat-in-hand, obsequious behavior. Here in America, Christians are usually written off as being a bunch of white privileged Americans coopting Jesus' voice to mansplain their biased opinions and judgements. Atheistic blogs and editorials accuse us of taking ourselves too seriously. Quoting Ghandi: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." What's the recourse? A forced exile. By in large, Christianity has been pushed out of mainstream thinking and made to sit on the sidelines. It has been privatized. The only form of Christianity people are willing to tolerate nowadays is a Christianity, which is kept hidden from the public. Christian faith is denied a seat at the table of business, politics, education or civil policy. Mainstream media insists on a "naked public square", denuded of any religious dialogue. It's okay to be spiritual not religious, they say, because spirituality is personal, affecting only you. Religion, on the other hand, is a public affair and intrudes upon an entire community.

With this in mind, I would like to think about the parable, and particularly the unfortunate guest who was thrown out of the wedding feast. What was his crime, you might ask? To be clear, his crime was not a crime of fashion. He was not forcefully removed because he failed to wear the right outfit for the special occasion as if he arrived wearing last year's fashion or without a black-tie. The whole parable deals with the matter of rejection, but his rejection was of the worst kind. He didn't reject the invitation out of hand, as the others had done. He at least showed up. But his

half-hearted presence communicated his own kind of rejection. Not an overt hostility, but a passive indifference. He was there, but not really. I would offer his unwillingness to wear the right clothes was not because he was arrogant or thought himself superior, but rather because he was embarrassed. So, his sin is one we can all relate to and identify with. This is how the parable speaks to us today. We, of course, pride ourselves on not being like the first group who rejected the invitation. We are here, aren't we? That has to count for something. Think of how many people don't even attend the banquet?

We received the invitation, and at least we have the decency to show up. We, of course, pride ourselves on not being like the second group who chose the affairs of the world over the Master's invitation. We set aside time each week. We put down our work, our play, our responsibilities and we designate a time to come together. We, of course, pride ourselves on not being like the final group, who in today's time kill the messengers with their harsh critiques and condemning words. Who proclaim in the public square, "God is dead!"

We can't relate to any of these invitees and so we are tempted to dismiss the parable as not speaking to us at all. But then we come to the awkward guest. He makes us uncomfortable. We can almost see ourselves in him. We relate to his feeling out of place. We come to the banquet. But we can't shake the feeling that everything we see and experience is off-putting. We come to the banquet, but the banquet hall is old. It smacks of ritual and tradition and superstition. Why can't church be more current? It feels close-minded, un-relatable. We come to the banquet, but the décor is out of sync. Altars, candles, crucifixes. These aren't normal. Even though the invitation is an open invitation, how can I invite my friends and family to this banquet? We come to the banquet, but the dress code is stifling. Why can't I wear what I want to wear? Why can't I be myself? Everyone here looks the same, wearing their white robes fashioned after the likeness of

the Founder of the Feast. Surely, I can dress myself. Be the person I want to be. But they keep telling me to deny myself, confess myself to be a sinner in thought, word and deed. I don't feel like a sinner. I am told my natural self is offensive, that I have died to myself only to be recreated into the likeness and image of the Son whom the world killed.

We can't help but be embarrassed. God and His ways will always be embarrassing to some degree and we will always feel that tinge of embarrassment when talking to Him or about Him with others. This is why we need the banquet. God embraces the embarrassment. He chooses the foolish things, the lowly things, the out of the way things. God embraces the embarrassment as He embraces us in His love. For the banquet is not what is embarrassing...we are. We are the ones who have forgotten how to enjoy the festivities of God. In our isolation we have forgotten how to be with others. Loneliness is now our constant companion. But God intends to teach us once again the blessings of fellowship. He should throw us out. We deserve it. Instead, He invites us into His home. He sits us in the seat of honor. He prepares a table before us. He anoints our hearts with gladness. He puts us at ease. He calms our fears, quiets our anxieties. He is the Master, but He is also the Servant. From Him all blessings flow as He pours all of Himself into us so that our cups spill over from His abundance. We take and eat. We take and drink. We are filled. We are satisfied. We are at peace. Our hearts are full so we can't remain silent. We must speak: "Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the marriage feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom, which shall have not end. We are honored guests. We are home. God is with us and we are with God. Amen.

In Christ,

Jeremy H. Mills