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Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

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

This is a sermon about the wedding garment -- the robe spoken of in our Gospel Lesson. But I do not begin with our Gospel Lesson, but rather approach our text by way of our Epistle Lesson. I want to begin by speaking of the conflict in the Philippian church. Here is my opening text. St. Paul is writing to the Philippians:

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.
³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Recently I enjoyed a conversation with a retired professor at Concordia College, Bronxville. We were sitting on a couch before the start of a theology conference, reminiscing about the old days. We got to talking about women in the church. I would say that my earliest ecclesiastical observation was that women are awfully important to the church. I remember sitting in the pew as a child, looking around at the actual people in church, and thinking to myself, "I guess women are just better than we are." Well, that's not quite true. There are lots of men in church too, and they have my admiration no end, along with my admiration for the women. Still, I have always believed that women are awfully important to the church. And this dear elderly professor had long believed so too.

He told me about two women in his childhood church who alternated as President of the Ladies Aid Society. Everyone else in this congregation seemed to agree that these two ladies were the natural ones to be the leaders. They were both devout Christians and strong leaders. You couldn't choose between them when it came to standing and leadership in the congregation, so they took turns leading.

Now suppose these two got into some kind of conflict. Let's give them names, say, Euodia and Syntyche. Suppose Euodia and Syntyche became cross with each other, and everyone else in the church knew it. Well, that would cause distress in the congregation. It's only natural. If two of your prominent leaders are mad at each other, it disturbs the peace. And it would sure be nice if they would forgive one another and reach reconciliation.

So it was in the early church at Philippi. Euodia and Syntyche were in conflict, and this conflict was such an important matter that St. Paul himself feels that he must address it. After all, for all we know these two women might have been

founding members of that church. St. Luke reports that the beginnings of that church stretch back to Paul's first visit there and his conversation with women of prayer at the riverside:

¹¹Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days; ¹³and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. (Acts 16:11-13, RSV)

It could have been that there on the riverside, St. Paul took up conversation with Euodia and Syntyche, with the godly result that a Christian congregation was established in that town. One way or the other, whether Euodia and Syntyche were founding members of the Philippian church or not, still they are prominent members there¹. In fact, St. Paul refers to them as his co-workers in the Gospel:

...they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel (Philippians 4:3, RSV)

He fully believes that their names "are in the book of life."

But now, these prominent women are in conflict. For the good of the congregation and for the faith of the people, it is important that Euodia and Syntyche be reconciled.

NOTICE ST. PAUL'S METHOD

Notice St. Paul's method in addressing the problem. Notice his pastoral approach. He does not deal with the details of the dispute, but rather with the larger picture. He emphasizes, not what divides these two women, but what unites them: Jesus Christ. They each depend upon the Lord, and he urges them to search for unity in him in the one they both claim:

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche *to be of the same mind in the Lord.*

¹ While it is uncertain whether St. Paul believed in what we call "the ordination of women," it is quite clear that he considered women to be his co-workers in the Gospel. In the Corinthian church, Paul seems to have had no problem with women praying or preaching. His complaint was not that they did priestly work, but that they would dare to do so with unveiled heads (1 Cor. 11:5). Likewise, at the end of Romans, when St. Paul is giving thanks for so many co-workers, he includes both men and women (Romans 16:1-16). Combining St. Paul's crediting of women colleagues with the preeminent place given to Mary the Mother of our Lord and to Mary Magdalene, the first to see our resurrected Lord, who in turn appointed her to be "apostle to the apostles," telling them of his resurrection, I conclude that it is an honorable proposal to the whole church on earth that women should be ordained too.

He reminds them that they have both struggled along with him for the gospel, and both their names are in the book of life. Christ could come any day now. Do they want to head off for heaven fussing and fighting and unreconciled on earth?

I think we could continue along these lines. We could bid these two great women to look at one another in a triune way, regarding the past, present, and future of each of them. Euodia, for example, could well bring to mind the many acts of hospitality and generosity and labors in the Lord performed by her old friend. And Syntyche, in turn, could contemplate not only the past goodness of Euodia, but also the good yet to be done by that old friend. And then each could recall their present status as followers of Christ. Each has nothing more to cling to than Jesus. They are united in this, and it would be good for them to reach some kind of unity that acknowledges this.

One of the post-communion prayers we often use here at Immanuel speaks of the need for peace and unity within the congregation. We have *each* received the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus has loved us each enough to die for us. Ought not our sense of self-pride and indignation die a little bit too, so that we can at least strive for peace and mutual respect with one another. The prayer puts it well:

Ⓐ Let us pray. Pour out upon us the spirit of your love, O Lord, and *unite the wills* of those whom you have fed with one heavenly food; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ⓒ Amen

Well, let's leave these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, for a few minutes and turn to our Gospel Lesson. Then, we will return to them, perhaps with a new urgency that they should be reconciled.

THE WEDDING GARMENT

Our Gospel Lesson has a rather breathtaking discussion of the wedding garment. A fellow has been accepted into the wedding banquet. He did not force his way in. He did not sneak in a side window. He was officially welcomed into the banquet. But he does not wear the wedding garment. I guess he feels free to go his own way, and to run roughshod over the normal expectations of the banquet. But the result is disastrous:

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This is a fierce outcome. This is a disaster. Clearly, something big is at stake in this matter of the wedding garment.

It is a puzzling parable because the king has invited *everyone* to his banquet -- “both the good and the bad,” the Bible says:

¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, *both good and bad*; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. (Matthew 22:10, NRSV)

The slaves scoured the streets. They went to the highways and the byways, and “gathered *all* they found.” So, the banquet hall is filled with both saints and sinners, yet the king is wrathful with just one of them -- the fellow without the wedding garment. Why did the king pick on him?

I think the answer has to do with the distinction between who is eligible for baptism versus what manner of life is right for those who *are* baptized.

The first question, “who is eligible for baptism” is that all welcome into the church. Both saints and sinners are welcome. Good thing too that the sinners are welcome, lest some of us would be left outside.

But the other question - what manner of life is appropriate for those who *are* in the church - has a firm answer too: the manner of life appropriate for those in the church is that they are to let Jesus Christ himself take shape in them. They are to try with increasing earnestness to be conformed to Christ.

And so, Jesus called his twelve disciples. None of them were saints when he first called them. And none of them were saints right off the bat once they started walking with Jesus. They often misunderstood Jesus and in the moment of crisis, they all fled and abandoned him. So, they were not saints at first, but they all tended toward sainthood, except for the betrayer Judas. They all tried to stick close to Jesus and to learn of him and to become more like him.

In the long history of Biblical interpretation, the wedding garment is taken to be a metaphor for life in Christ -- for the sanctified life appropriate for the baptized. That is, faith should be adorned by good works. This is not a parable about the etiquette of dress. It is a parable about the life of the baptized.

The wedding garment is such a strong metaphor for Christian life that sometimes a white garment is part of the baptism liturgy. Our boys, Sam and David, for example, were both baptized in the baptism gown of Carol’s grandfather. To be baptized is to “put on Christ.” And for one who has put on Christ, a definite manner of life is appropriate.

BACK TO EUODIA AND SYNTYCHE.

And this brings us back to Euodia and Syntyche. I said that it was an urgent matter for St. Paul that their conflict be resolved. It turns out to be urgent not just for the sake of the congregation, but also for the souls of these two women. He wants them to be of one mind in Christ, both for the sake of the peace of the

congregation, but also for the integrity of their Christian identity. After all, whose mind should a Christian seek if not the mind of Christ?

St. Paul enlarges his discussion of these two women to include all of the Philippians and all Christians. In a whole series of exhortations, he is urging us to put on our wedding garment:

⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

PUTTING ON CHRIST

Adding today's Bible Lessons together, I think we can reach this conclusion: Let us seek both to enter the wedding banquet *and* to be found there with our wedding garment. Let those who are admitted to the holy fellowship with Jesus, put on Jesus whom they follow. Let our appearance be transformed by our following of our Lord.

In a way, the chief question for the day-to-day life of the Christian is the matter of our appearance. Fair is fair: We ought not come to Christ, and go on looking just as we did before. The inner logic of following Jesus is that those who love their Lord should come to resemble their Lord. And so again and again, apostolic exhortation takes the form of bidding us to wear the wedding garment appropriate for those in the divine wedding banquet:

²⁷For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have *put on* Christ. (Galatians 3:27, KJV)

¹²The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. ¹³Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. ¹⁴But *put ye on* the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof. (Romans 13:12-14, KJV)

²²*Put off* your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, ²³and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and *put on* the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24, RSV)

¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

¹²For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

¹³Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

¹⁴Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

¹⁵And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

¹⁶Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

¹⁷And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:

¹⁸Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

¹⁹And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

²⁰For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:11-20, KJV)

⁹Do not lie to one another (do not deceive one another), seeing that you have *put off* the old nature with its practices ¹⁰and have *put on* the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. ¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these *put on love*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:9-14, RSV)

THE BENEDICTION

Let me conclude now with the benediction from today's Epistle Reading. It is a famous one. I am quite confident you will recognize it. But this time I want to restore St. Paul's benediction to its context, for it is the culmination of a series of apostolic exhortations to Christian life: to joy, gentleness, prayer, and all together, to being arrayed in our wedding garment, adorned with Christ:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7, NRSV)

... in Christ Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.