The great theologian Donald Rumsfeld once said, “As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.” Which is exactly what Jesus is telling us today. Well, not exactly, or actually maybe not at all, but I do still have a reason for bringing up this quote. And this is because the parable we get from Jesus today is the parable we have, but I suspect for many it is not the parable we want. The basic outline of it is this: A king has a big banquet and those who are supposed to come refuse, so he instead invites the rabble and those who would not normally be invited to such an event. And stopping at this point, I think, would give us the parable that we really want. We might add in a moment when everybody claps or Tiny Tim stands up and says, “God bless us everyone.” The main intent would be to give us a nice bit of saccharine. We could feel good about the lowly getting rewarded with a nice feast. But Jesus does not let it end on a sentimental, stick out your lower lip note type note, instead he ends it on a somewhat harsh note. The king is going around to his wedding guests and “noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then 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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” I am sure the Hallmark Channel would cut this scene because as I started off saying this is not the parable that we want. And so, we need to ask what God is trying to tell us.

First let’s start with what the message would have been with the parable we want to have; that is this parable sans the casting out into the outer darkness bit. In such a parable the main takeaway would be that the smug gentrified class get their comeuppance and the lowly are given exalted status. And you could say that such an interpretation does not necessarily go against things Jesus says elsewhere like in Matthew when he says, “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” And this is true but also remember that the next sentence out of the mouth of Jesus is “many are called, but few are chosen.” So even in this instance there is more to it than God simply calling the lowly. There is more to being the last than simply being the last. In the full proclamations of Jesus something is expected of us. In terms of the parable it is a wedding garment, but in terms of our life in God it is something else. Obviously, this parable is not really about the rich and the proud getting their just desserts but is rather about the manner of the invitation that God gives and the response that is expected from us. We are not going to get to stay at the banquet based solely on what class of people we come from. God’s invitation is open to all, but God’s invitation also comes with expectations about how we are supposed to behave. We cannot rely on human classifications as a way to have our salvation assured. What I mean by this is God does not look at our income or our job or how important of hair we might have, rather God looks at what he commands to see if we are living in accordance with that. This is what the wedding garment is. Something that will be painfully obvious in God’s eyes. And so, the question for us becomes how do we ensure that we are the guests who wear their wedding garment; that we do not rely on our background or status but instead seek to be prepared for the wedding feast?

Now before I go on there is always a caveat that needs to be introduced when talking about making ourselves worthy of the Kingdom of God. The fact of the matter is we cannot work our way up to God by our own initiative but must ultimately rely on God’s grace. But this fact does not mean that we are involved in a one-way relationship – God is not supposed to do all of the work. God grants us his grace but he also expects us to participate – to put on our wedding garment. And so, with that out of the way how are ways that we can participate in God’s grace and his plan of salvation for us?

There are a lot of things that we can do but for simplicity I want to look at what Jesus will say a few verses after this parable. Jesus is asked by a man, “What is the greatest commandment?” and he replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

So obviously there are two parts to this statement. The first is that we are to begin with our love of God, which sounds really nice but what exactly does this mean? There are certainly spiritual practices that we could look into, we can attend church regularly, we can pray without ceasing, but today I want to suggest just one item that in many ways is much simpler, our calendar. If we reviewed what was done for the week and how much time was spent on each activity what sort of story would it tell? Now putting aside things we have to do -- pay bills, eat lunch, watch the Packers – what would our calendar tell us? If we make the assumption that we spend time on the things we love how much love would our calendar show for God? And so, my nudge to you and to myself as well is to spend more time with God. This can be a time of prayer, it can be time spent reading a devotional or the Bible, it can just be a time of silence where we listen for that still small voice of God. Whatever it is, the way we spend our week should be a love letter to God.

And now onto the second part of what Jesus says, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Here again, I want to just suggest one thing and that one thing is charity. I don’t mean this in the sense that we should do a fundraiser for our neighbor but rather that we treat them charitably. Charity is Christian love, a love that thinks favorably on others and their actions. Let me tell you what that looks like. We recently had a Vice-Presidential debate and depending on which media coverage you looked at you either learned that Harris wiped the floor with Pence or Pence wiped the floor with Harris. Why did we learn such contradictory things? We did so because each side does not think charitably of the other. Any mistakes by their side are either dismissed or interpreted in the best possible way, while the mistakes and problems of the other side are magnified and interpreted in the most noxious way possible. But if we are charitable with our political opponents and with our neighbor we will not look to their actions and see how we can use those to destroy them but rather to see how we can love them and how we can interpret their actions in the most loving way possible. When God is asking about our wedding garment, he is asking us what we did when he was a stranger and whether or not we took him in.

And so back to the parable that we have today. It is a reminder of both God’s incredible generosity but also of God’s expectations. This may not be the reminder we want, but it is the reminder we need. We are asked to live in this world with the same love and generosity that God exhibits towards us this day and forevermore.