

October 15, 2023
Pentecost 20
What Would You Wear?
Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I have a confession to make:

I would rather preach about *anything* but *this* gospel text.

Like the comforting 23rd Psalm, or Paul's gracious letter to the Philippians
or the lyric poetry of Isaiah.

But THIS! Good grief, Jesus...it's bad enough your last parable was about beating
and killing slaves and sons...now this!?!?

But, there is no ignoring the “elephant in the room” – this troubling parable.

In these few years of preaching I have learned,

when the scripture disturbs, it means we need to *wrestle* with it, not *avoid* it.

So, here goes!

Jesus says,

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king

who gave a wedding banquet for his son”.

Apparently, Matthew is obsessed with the kingdom of heaven.

What is he getting at, this time?

It is helpful to examine the first century context where this gospel was heard.

It was written to the Jewish community that had rejected Jesus.

Matthew positions Jesus speaking to the religious leaders

who had been blamed for crucifying Jesus.

The parable is a simple story, one that the writer has already told in different ways:

The important folks blew off the king's invitation to an important wedding,
worse, they killed the king's servants.

Sound familiar?

The furious king sent the *army* to kill the guests and destroy their city.

Well, that seems a bit over the top, don't you think?

Undaunted and wanting a full banquet hall the king sends more servants

to invite everyone who is left, good and bad. And they came!

One of these guests made the fatal mistake

of not wearing a proper wedding garment.

The king tossed him out – permanently – into the irredeemable outer darkness.

Also a harsh overreaction?

To say this parable is disturbing is an understatement.

It would be easier to just read the story

and move on to all things good and honorable.

It seems that we, like the first hearers of this parable, like it or not,

have fallen into a pattern of avoiding the texts that require us to judge

the characters in biblical stories.

Let's just admit that we have an opinion about the ones who were first invited,

about the king,

about the poorly dressed guest,

about all the characters in the story, in scripture?

Could it be that our responses to the people we meet in real life,

especially the ones who appear different, or act differently

comes out of this learned biblical response.

Consider these parables we have heard from Jesus in these past weeks.

Jesus draws us in with the phrase: “the kingdom of heaven is like”.

I wonder if the first hearers imagined themselves as the aggrieved king,

or the busy guests?

When they realized Jesus implied that *they* are the ones wearing the wrong clothes,

they are so enraged they want to kill Jesus.

“Did you wear THAT to church?”

My mother asked this every time I visited her at the

Adult Foster Care Home where she lived the last two years of her life.

There were rules about what was acceptable “Sunday Best” dress.

Her version of:

Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe”?

No white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day, except, of course Easter.

Boys shoes polished.

White ankle socks and patent leather Mary Janes on the girls

Clean t-shirts under crisply pressed shirts.

A slip under every dress.

What we wore to church mattered to my mother.

She saw to it that her seven children looked respectable in the sanctuary.

She wanted us to “fit in”, to be appropriate.

There is a little of my mom in each of us.

But here’s the good news in Jesus’s parable and in mine:

God invites us to this banquet.

In fact, *everyone* is invited! The good and the bad, EVERYONE!

At this banquet, forgiveness and mercy are served in abundance.

We are *already* appropriately clothed in our baptismal garment
of grace and righteousness, not because WE put it on,
but because God put it on us.

As the prophet Isaiah said:

[God] “has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
And covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

It’s easy to slip into the habit of exceptionalism,
claiming our specialness as the “insiders”,
the keepers and defenders of the faith.

There is a danger that we will expect other guests to wear the
“proper wedding garments”
when, we really ought to check our own garments.

I wonder if we could see the ill-dressed guest as one who has not yet fully realized the glorious nature of the banquet to which they have been invited and so just showed up, kind of nonchalantly and plopped down.

I wonder if we might be the ones in danger of being thrown out because we have not recognized the significance of the wedding banquet, or the joy of community like the Philippians, or the safety of Psalm 23 or the celebration of Isaiah 25?

Is it possible we've become nonchalant about this amazing invitation...?

All right, before we get too caught up in what to wear and what not to wear, remember, this parable is not about clothing our bodies, it is about clothing our souls.

It is about proclaiming the inclusive gospel of Jesus Christ

to a world that is obsessed with who is “in” and who is “out”.

Who are the cool kids? Who has the best toys?

Who are the powerful in government and industry *and* the church?

News Flash! Deciding who is “in” and who is “out” is not our job.

Making the rules for who is “in” and who is “out” is not our job.

Our job is to go out into the streets to invite everyone we can find to the banquet,

the good and the bad, saint and sinner and

Jesus already decided who is “in” when he invites everyone to this meal.

At this table we rejoice because, “the Lord is near”.

Jesus is present in, with and under this bread and wine.

There is no requirement to WEAR your Sunday best.

The only requirement is to LIVE your Sunday best, every day.

Lives that reflect the life to which God has called us,

ignorant of outward fashion, clothed instead in whatever is true,

whatever is honorable, whatever is just,

whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable,

Lives in which we think about those things that are worthy of praise.

Not in a “gee, I hope everything will be ok,

bury-your-head-in-the-sand kind of way.

Rather in active ways that lift up the ones who are left out,

the ones who are truly persecuted,

the Black and Brown bodies that are gunned down,

the children separated from their parents,

the differently abled who are mocked and ridiculed,

the ones who are beaten and killed because of who they love.

The ones for whom God has set a table in the face of their enemies.

I think my mom got it right . . .

it is our duty, our joy, our delight to “dress up for Jesus”,

a joy-filled, spiritual dressing up in response to God’s amazing gift.

The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a wedding feast

where all are welcome, and that means ALL!

Where the peace of God is for everyone! EVERYONE!

Thanks be to God.