

“Wearing the Right Clothes”
Mt. 22:1-14
Sunday, October 15, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Have you ever shown up at an event wearing the wrong clothes? It’s formal and you show up casual. It’s black tie and you arrive in khakis and a sport shirt.

One time, years ago, a friend asked me to sing and play guitar at a gathering of clergywomen. I was used to retreats with these women, very relaxed and informal. So I showed up in blue jeans and a T-shirt, guitar in hand -- only to discover that this was a big, formal, professional clergywomen’s event. Not only were my retreat friends there, but also women I had never met before. Everyone, it seemed, was dressed in power suits. Except me.

Looking back on it, I should have asked my friend why she didn’t clue me in.

Now, no one threw me into “outer darkness” for wearing the wrong clothes. There was no “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 13) on my part. There was, however, a twinge of embarrassment at being improperly dressed for the occasion.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22 is violent and disturbing. Wedding invitees kill some of the king’s servants; the king sends out his soldiers in retribution. The king invites new folks to the wedding banquet; strangers from “the roads on the edge of town.” Even then the trouble isn’t over. Someone shows up “without wedding clothes.” So he’s tossed out “into the farthest darkness.” This is a dark and unsettling story. We might want to consider wearing the right clothes to this wedding banquet. But what would the right clothes be?

I. Wearing the wrong clothes.

There was a time when proper dress was expected at church. That time is long past. Maybe that's a good thing. Once upon a time folks dressed up for church as a way to honor God. Women wore dresses; some added gloves and hats. Men wore suits and ties. Nowadays it's jeans, shorts, flip-flops, T-shirts – whatever is most comfortable. The idea is that we want folks, especially younger folks, to feel welcome. We want folks who can't afford fancy clothes to feel welcome. We want church to be about what's in our hearts, not about what we're wearing.

It's a good thing, don't you think? – our current approach to worship attire? Come as you are, because God loves you as you are; God can use you just as you are. For Sunday morning to be the battle of who wore the prettiest dress or who looks best in a three-piece suit...that's not what the worship of God is all about.

So why is the king in Jesus' story so angry? After he generously invites everyone to the wedding banquet of his beloved Son – after God invites everyone to the Sunday morning celebration of who Jesus is... After the king sends his servants to the roads at the edge of town, where the worst of the worst, the dregs of society hang out – after God seeks after the least and the lost, the most horrible of sinners the world has ever known... After these worst of the worst are invited to the feast, they come! They arrive, ready to celebrate the wedding party of the ages. They come, ready to worship and praise and love and adore the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Well, all except one guy who sneaks in for the food but doesn't give a rat's behind about the king's Son, doesn't care about Jesus at all. He shows up with the wrong attitude. He's there for the wrong reasons. The king is angry because this guy shows up without wedding clothes. But again we ask, what would the right clothes be? What would they look like?

II. Clothed with Christ.

Let's look for a moment at some New Testament passages about clothing.

In Romans 13:14 it says: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

1 Corinthians 15:53 gives us a promise: "For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

And Galatians 3:27 reminds us: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

1 Peter 5:5 teaches: "All of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"

And finally, this beautiful passage from Colossians 3:12-17: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

According to the witness of the New Testament, to wear the right clothes is to be clothed with Christ. It is to put on new clothes; it is to be baptized into new life. At baptism we die to ourselves, and we are raised again to new life in Christ.

"Wearing wedding clothes" is a New Testament way of describing holy and righteous

living. We throw off the old clothes and put on new clothes. We throw off our old ways of being and put on the new way of kingdom living. Sounds great! Makes sense!

But there is a paradox in Jesus' story. God invites everyone to the wedding banquet – the worst of the worst, the least of the least, the most horrible sinners in the world – everyone is invited. God welcomes all of us with open arms.

We are right to hold on to this image of God -- a Father who runs down the dirt road to greet the Prodigal Son, forgiving and forgetting all past sins in favor of the joy of the prodigal's return.

This is God's response to each of us when we return to Him. He welcomes us with open arms.

A question was once asked of C. S. Lewis. One of his colleagues asked him, "Is there one belief unique to Christianity?" C. S. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy: it's grace."

Martin Thielen wrote a book; I love the title: What's The Least I Can Believe And Still Be A Christian?" Martin Thielen comments on C. S. Lewis's understanding of grace:

"God's unconditional grace, offered to human beings with no strings attached, is indeed unique in the world's religions. Buddhists follow an eightfold path to righteousness. Hindus believe in the doctrine of karma. Jews, in order to receive God's blessings, must obey God's covenant. Islam has a strict code of law that all Muslims must follow. In one way or another, every religion of the world requires people to earn God's approval – every religion except Christianity. The one belief that is completely unique to the Christian faith is grace: God's unconditional love and acceptance of us just as we are."

So here's the paradox – if we show up with no intention of changing our lives...if we show up with no sincere love for Jesus, the bridegroom, God's beloved Son...if we show up for

the food, the good stuff, the stuff that makes us feel good but we're not ready to take up our cross and follow Him... Well, if we show up without our wedding clothes, there are dire consequences.

This is God's nature, grace and justice held in tension. We need to hear and believe and know – in every cell of our bodies – that God loves us just as we are. We come just as we are, by God's loving, gracious invitation.

At the same time, if we sit in the pew, year after year, and never allow Christ to change us -- we risk getting tossed out of the ultimate wedding bash of the ages. Or, if we drift away from the church, never giving our all for God and God's kingdom; never stepping up to be of service to others – we risk sticking out like a sore thumb at God's Cosmic Party for His Son the Beloved.

We hold God's grace in tension with the image of God the angry king. The king is offended at anyone who shows disdain or disrespect for His Son, Jesus -- the bridegroom.

This is God's response to each of us when we treat Jesus in a cavalier manner.

The Christian faith is serious business. We are about the work of a God who is serious about saving the world. We have to make a choice. We can't have it both ways. We can't hang around at the party forever without making a decision – Do we love Jesus? Are we ready to let Him change us? Are we ready to be clothed in Christ? Are we ready to be clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness, and the wisdom of God's Holy Word?

God loves us unconditionally.

God expects us to change our ways in grateful response to His unconditional love.

III. Clothed with ourselves.

God, the King, gets angry when we forget all that Jesus has suffered and sacrificed for us. We waltz into the kingdom like it's all about us – What've you done for me lately, God? We want God to love us and forgive us and make us feel good. But do we really want to be like Jesus? Do we really want to be “clothed with Christ?”

Paul A. Siple was the leader of a team of scientists who studied conditions at the South Pole. In his workroom at that distant outpost he had a large globe of the world. It was upside down.

“When you're right side up at the South Pole,” said Dr. Siple, “It's the rest of the world that's upside down.”

This is how it is for Christians. This is what it means to be like Jesus. This is what it's like to be “clothed with Christ.” When His Holy Spirit infuses our lives, we are centered in Him. We are captured by His Spirit of peace and joy. We are ruled by His ways of love and forgiveness. When we are centered in Christ, “it's the rest of the world” that looks upside down to us.

As Christians, when we are baptized, we become “clothed with Christ.” God looks at us and sees his beloved Son, and we are washed in the love that flows between the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit.

If we show up at God's wedding feast for his beloved Son, and if we are not wearing the appropriate attire for the banquet, if we are not clothed with Christ, then God sees us as having rejected his Son. Filled with pride, we have chosen to go our own way, rather than following God's way. We have chosen to be “clothed with ourselves.” God has generously invited all people to the wedding banquet for his Son. We are welcomed guests, no strings attached. “The

good and the bad” (v. 10) – everyone! – is invited.

There are no requirements for getting an invitation; however, once invited, we do have a couple of obligations: 1) we must accept the invitation. The king destroys the city of those who refuse the invitation and murder the king’s messengers; 2) we must come to the banquet “wearing a wedding robe” (v.11). We must “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom13:14). We must “clothe ourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27). Why do we resist wearing the right clothes?

There’s a story about a doctor who received a call late at night to come to the hospital. Someone was near death and needed a physician's attention or death was certain. The hospital was 30 miles away in another town. The doctor dressed and took off in his car. At a stoplight a man jumped into his car, pulled a gun, and told the doctor to get out. “I need your car. Get out,” was all he said. The doctor got out and had to find another way to get to the hospital. When he finally arrived the nurse met him and told him the woman just died. “You are too late, Doctor. But would you go and say a word to the husband. He is weeping uncontrollably in the family lounge.” When the doctor entered the lounge he found the husband in a corner. To his great surprise he discovered that the husband was the very man who pulled the gun on him because he needed his car.

Sometimes we push out of our lives the very thing that could help us. Maybe it’s the church, or the Bible; maybe it’s Christian friends, or a nudge to make a clear commitment. Maybe it’s taking that first step of accepting the invitation to the wedding feast. (source: George S. Johnson, Critical Decisions in Following Jesus).

Closing.

Balance is centrally important in the traditions of the Christian faith. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet reminds us to balance our understanding of God’s love with the reality of

God's requirement that we honor and follow His Son.

Christianity is serious business.

That does not mean the wedding banquet is not meant to be a party. The kingdom of God is a great and exciting event. But what do we teach our children about this Kingdom? Do we teach them that the party will be a bore? In a poetic parody of "serious" instructions to children, Ann Weems writes:

"What do we want to tell the children?

Jesus Christ says, comb your hair./ And what do we tell the children?

Jesus Christ says, sit on your chair./ And what do we tell the children?

Jesus Christ says, be polite.

And what do we tell the children?/ Jesus Christ says, do everything right!

Jesus says, please sit down./ Jesus says, do not frown.

Jesus says, don't cry if you're hurt./ Jesus says, don't play in the dirt.

Jesus says, don't have any fun!

And what do we want to tell the children?

We want to tell them shhhhh!"

(From Ann Weems' "Reaching for Rainbows").

God tells us to be noisy and dirty, to have fun, to party, to get crazy, and to celebrate. Just follow two simple rules: Accept God's invitation to the party. And when you come, be like Jesus. Wear a sincere heart that seeks to be like Jesus.

Welcome to the party! Invite a friend!

Amen.