

Sunday Best

Matthew 22:1-14

There's a certain kind of dream that most people seem to have had at one time or another. It is a dream where you find yourself underdressed, or even undressed in a public place, or at a social event. Typically, in this dream, nobody else really seems to notice that you're only wearing underwear or pajamas, or whatever you're wearing, or not wearing as the case may be. But, *you know* how exposed you are; how inappropriately dressed you are for the situation you are in. And usually you spend the dream frantically searching for something to cover you before someone does pay attention and asks you what on earth you think you're doing going about your business in public wearing only your skivvies.

Well, I don't know what kinds of dreams Jesus had when he closed his eyes; I don't know if he ever had one of those dreams I just described. But it sure fits this parable, doesn't it? Because, here we have this wedding guest who is underdressed for the occasion. I'm not saying he was in his underwear: maybe he was dressed in his common everyday robes instead of his Sunday best outfit. Nobody appears to be paying attention to the fact that the man is not properly attired. But as soon as the king who is hosting the banquet lays eyes on him, he challenges the man's lack of proper dress.

Who is this wedding guest and what was so grievous about his clothing that it got him thrown out of the wedding banquet?! He wasn't on the original guest list. Those who were the first to be invited to the wedding had all turned up their noses when the King's slaves delivered the invitations to them. When the food was hot and the drinks were poured, the King sent out his servants to tell those who had been invited that dinner was served. For a variety of reasons, not one of them came when the dinner bell was rung. One went to his farm, and another to take care of his business. Which tells us that they were upper class landowners and merchants. The sort of guests you would expect to see at a royal wedding.

The king in the parable doesn't give up easy, though. Before the food gets cold, he sends his slaves out one more time. This time the King tells them to scour the street corners and alleys, inviting anyone and everyone they can find. These are people who never dreamed they would be invited to a royal feast. It is an invitation of pure grace, based not on their station in life, or their accomplishments, but on their willingness to share in the celebration of the king's son.

But the purpose of this parable is to illustrate something about the Kingdom of heaven, not wedding etiquette. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." Now, if this story is about the kingdom of heaven, it can only be talking about one king, right? And since it is Jesus telling the story, guess who the king's son is? Jesus. And who is the lucky bride? We are! The "Bride of Christ" is a title that is used to describe the Church multiple times in the Bible.

The invitation to be a part of God's kingdom begins with an invitation to a relationship with Jesus. At the heart of the invitation to be a guest in the kingdom of heaven is a proposal to be in relationship with Jesus. And that is the invitation that has been extended to you and me. The B-list guests in the parable didn't have an advance warning that they would be attending such a formal affair. There was nothing about them that distinguished them as important or deserving. It says that the servants invited *everyone, good and bad*. They might have gone to their closets and wondered to themselves, whatever

will I wear? No need to worry about that, though. The king himself supplied these guests with a wedding robe to put on as they entered the hall.

Which brings us back to that out of place, underdressed guest. The one without the complimentary robe provided by the king. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" the king asks him. Those dreams about not being properly clothed in public are believed to reflect feelings of personal unpreparedness and unworthiness. They are generated by our subconscious fears of having our deepest shames exposed. Something psychologists call "Imposter Syndrome."

In our dreams, and in our waking lives, maybe nobody notices what we fear is blatantly wrong with us. We may think we cover our faults and frailties under the public persona we wear. But God sees through to the heart of us. Not with the condemnation we fear, but with an invitation to be transformed; to be reclothed. God loves us as we are, that is why we have been invited to the banquet. But God loves us too much to leave us as we are. None of us are invited into the life of the kingdom because we have it all together. But God offers to mend the frayed edges and tears in the garment of our lives.

I am reminded by this parable of a Baptist church where I did my Field Education years ago. One Sunday we baptized about a dozen adults in the baptismal pool. Each person being baptized was given a white robe to wear as they waded into the water. The robe was a symbol of their new life as a baptized follower of Christ. I think that is what the wedding robes in the parable are like. They represent the new life that is expected of those who have been shown grace; our baptismal identity. This parable isn't about what we wear on the outside, but who God is making us on the inside.

God doesn't care if you come to church wearing flannel or cashmere. If you're watching this sermon on YouTube or Facebook, your Sunday Best today might be pajamas or a bathrobe. No judgment. God is interested in the fabric of your life, not the fabric on your body. And we all – every one of us – when we accept the invitation of grace are in need of a makeover if we are to be well suited for the kingdom of heaven. A person can "go to church" their whole life without ever experiencing the inner transformation that comes only through an intimate relationship to Jesus.

The wedding robe given to the guests represents the way of life that honors the occasion and the host of the banquet. It is a garment whose pattern is faithfulness, compassion, justice-seeking, peacemaking and generosity. It clothes us as a follower of Jesus and it is tailored especially for each individual. But it is not a robe of our own making. It is a gift we receive. But it is up to us whether we wear it or not. God calls us to come as we are, but God makes us into something new. What got the undressed guest thrown out of the party was his reluctance to being reoutfitted as a new person. He was only looking for a free meal, but he was not there to honor the Son.

They say that 98% of life is just showing up. The guest in the parable must have believed that the Kingdom of heaven is just about showing up. That the king was just looking for warm bodies to sit at his table. But God wants so much more than that for God's church. God wants people who will care enough to live in ways that will glorify the guest of honor at the banquet of the kingdom. People who will show the world their devotion to the Son by the way they live and the things that they do. Not only in the banquet hall, but whenever they go back out to the street-corners where the King first found them.

In the generosity they show towards the ministries of the Church through which the needy are cared for, the rejected are welcomed.

May the lives we live be a robe that matches the grace that we have received, compliments the ministry we have been given, and suits the life to which God has invited us.

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