

“God’s Dress Code”
Matthew 22:1-14

There’s a tale of an American tourist on a Sahara desert safari who gets separated from the group and becomes hopelessly lost. After a long morning in the sun and heat, he spots a man riding toward him on a donkey. "Please help me! I'm dying of thirst!" "I'm sorry," the stranger replies. "All I have are neckties." "Neckties? I need water!" "I like you," the man goes on, "so here's what I'm going to do. I usually get \$15 per tie, but seeing as you're suffering, I'll let you have two for 25 bucks." The tourist stomps away in disgust. Three hours later, he sees an oasis. By now he's on his knees and as he crawls toward it, looks up to see a man in a tuxedo standing under a palm tree. "Please," he asks "do you have any water." "Oh, sure!" comes the reply "Plenty of water." "Great, great. Where do I go?" "This way, sir. The restaurant is right inside. Unfortunately, I can't let you in without a tie." (*Bits 'n Pieces*, June 17, 1999, pp. 8-9)

While we can smile at the absurdity of that scene, the reality is that dress codes are often part of our everyday life. Schools have rules of what students can and cannot wear. Workplaces have implied or stated standards that are sometimes relaxed on Fridays and sometimes not. Wedding or dinner invitations can speak of black tie or business casual. All of which makes the Biblical passage before us this morning startling as it implies that heaven has a dress code, too.

That text offers a parable from Jesus. It tells of a king who invites persons to a wedding banquet for his son and sends servants out on the day of the event to bring in the guests, but all of them refuse to attend. A second invitation is extended, but the reaction is worse. “They made light of it,” Jesus says “and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them and killed them.” The king, of course, is furious and reacts by burning the city of his would-be guests and sending his servants into the streets to “invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Soon a large group fills the room, but the king spots a guest who is improperly dressed. “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” he asks. When the man cannot explain his attire, the king has him bound and thrown out into the outer darkness. Jesus concludes "For many are called, but few are chosen."

While often referred to as a parable, the story is better understood as an allegory where each element represents someone or something else. Heard in that way with the king depicting God and the son as Jesus, the account offers a condensed history of salvation, recalling how God first sought to bring the Jews of old into covenant and when they rejected his invitation despite the urging of prophets, God turned to the Gentile or non-Jew. The allegory moves beyond the start of Christianity though and gives a symbol of the Last Judgment when at the messianic banquet one is excluded due to clothing. In other words, one who had professed faith is removed.

Now, I will be the first to admit that such a story could seem like an odd choice for this preacher on a day when we have intentionally invited neighbors to breakfast and when many of us are dressed for the arts festival and bike race to follow. Yet the more I pondered Jesus’ words the more fitting they seemed for our guests and members as they offer insight into God’s expectation for all of us, in particular after one has professed the faith.

In exploring the background of the parable, I could find no evidence that weddings in that era required guests to wear robes. Given this tale of a man being invited at the last moment, it is certainly unreasonable to think he would have even had time to acquire a robe, much less change his clothes. Thus, many scholars argue that what is being named by Jesus is not a divine dress code for salvation, but a call for faith to change a person in visible ways. Elsewhere in the Bible

a new set of clothes is offered as an image of the ongoing conversion needed for all believers. In Colossians, for instance, Paul tells some new Christians to "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...above all, clothe yourselves with love." Our call to worship, too, speaks of how new clothes symbolize a transformed life.

Heard in that larger context, it seems to me that Jesus is speaking of something far more significant than the cut or fit of one's clothing and instead is revealing how professing faith is not the end. Certainly God desires that all the world accept the Good News of Jesus Christ, but this parable demonstrates that such a response of the heart and mind is not enough; that God wants each believer is to be changed. Don't misunderstand me. We are not saved by anything other than grace, but even so God intends for us to be transformed by that step and one's clothing is only a symbol of change. Let me give an example of one Christian who missed the point.

Several years ago, radio personality Paul Harvey told of how each November and December the Butterball Turkey Company has something called the Turkey Talk-Line. It is way for consumers to get answers to their questions about preparing the bird for their holiday feasts. One day, a woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for twenty-three years. The operator told her it might be safe if the freezer had been kept below zero the entire time, but even so the flavor had probably deteriorated and that she wouldn't recommend eating it. After hearing the advice, the caller replied "That's what we thought, too. We'll just give it to the church." (*Leadership*, Summer 1996, p. 71)

What that woman clearly misunderstood is that we are called to give God our best and not what is left over; that the divine intention is not for persons simply to join a church, but to be changed by that step. Put another way, a profession of faith is not the end, but only the start to a life of transformation; of putting on new clothes and leaving behind old ways.

That seems to have been what was missing for the man who was tossed out in Jesus' parable as there was no change in him. He had not put on the new clothes that represented the new life and that proved to be his undoing. One scholar put it this way: "the wedding garment of personal righteousness was not necessary to be invited to the party [but it] was necessary in order to stay in the party." (Bruner, Dale. *Matthew, A Commentary*, Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990, p. 777) In other words, that without change he had not fully accepted the invitation.

I once was working with a couple who were about to get married and asked them what role the church would play in their new life together. They both said faith really was not that important to them and that even though they both had gone to church as children it never "took." They added that they weren't attending anywhere and didn't see that changing in the near future either. Yet immediately after saying that the groom-to-be offered that once they had children they would make sure they started going to church, because "it would be good for them."

He was right, for church is good for children, but not only little ones, as it is intended for all of God's children--people of all ages. What he didn't yet understand, though, was that faith is not taught by dropping kids off for Church School or youth group, but by committing as a family to share in that journey at church and at home. Growth isn't something that occurs just by looking on from the pew and it doesn't just happen when a person joins a church either. A wise person once said "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a barn makes you a cow" and that's true as God seeks something more; namely that we grow.

Such growth can begin when one who has resisted previous invitations says to a friend "What time are the services at your church? I'd like to go with you." Growth can start when a member decides to complete all the clearances necessary to work with our children or youth.

Growth occurs when one starts using a daily devotional or joins a study group, comes to a choir rehearsal or realizes that Jesus does not ask us to give of our time or talents or treasures, but all three. Growth can happen in all kinds of ways, but it always involves additional steps; when we put on those symbolic clothes that demonstrate a deepening faith.

I've given you two examples of times when Christians missed the point. Let me conclude with the account of a time when a gathering of believers clearly got it right.

Anne LaMott, the author and Presbyterian, once told the true story of a seven-year-old girl who became lost. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived," LaMott writes "but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat...and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here." (Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies*. New York: Anchor Books, 1999, pp. 54-55)

That is the hope of this church as well, that collectively, we will help persons find their way home. Not just seven year-olds, but 107 year-olds and all those in-between. Not just those who have become lost on some city street, but those who have become lost in their relationships or priorities or sense of self; that we help persons find their way back home and do so as we continue to grow in our own relationship with Christ and each other.

So, if you are seeking a church home, we invite you to consider becoming part of this community. If you are already a member, but see ways you have been looking on from afar, I encourage you to take the next step toward allowing God to change your life. And to do so while knowing that while clothes do not make a man or woman of faith, a transformed life does.