The wedding planning had gone without a hitch. Mr. and Mrs. King had hired the best wedding planner in the land. The save the date cards had gone out 6 months in advance just as was the custom and the formal, hand engraved invitations had been mailed 8 weeks before just as the planner recommended. Mr. and Mrs. King cordially invite you to the wedding of their son.....

The enclosure card for the RSVP was included and just below the acceptance line was the italicized print…appropriate attire required.

It was time to party!

The best food was prepared, the casaba, los tacos, el asado, the shrimp and grits, the carving station with the perfectly prepared prime rib. The most beautiful flowers adorned every table. The most amazing highly sought after band was tuning up. The best champagne was being poured into the champagne flutes ready for the toast. The wedding cake sat like a trophy in the center of the room. The photographers were poised and ready to photograph each guest as they arrived.

It was time to party! Mr. King sent all the king's horses and all the king's men to gather up their guests. But despite all the right planning, some things began to go terribly wrong.

The guests refused to come.

Not willing to give up on the party, Mr. King sends out another round of horses and men to let the guests know just what kind of party they would be missing. The best food, the best flowers, the best champagne! It is ready!

Things really begin to fall apart. Not only do they refuse to come but to add insult to injury, they make light of the invitation. They are too busy.

This is when I wish I was preaching from Luke’s version of the parable rather than Matthews! Luke’s guests were much more polite. They just regretfully declined. In Matthew’s version, some of the invited guests even killed Mr. King’s servants!
No one kills anybody in Luke’s version. But THIS is the world of Matthew’s gospel, not Luke’s and in Matthew, the story just gets darker and darker. The king sets cities on fire and kills the intended guests.

WOW! This will make me think twice next time I decline a wedding invitation.

Still not willing to give up on the party Mr. King asks his servants to go out one more time, this time he asks them to go to the edge of the town. And invite EVERYONE – I take that to mean EVERYONE — the good, the bad, the fit and the misfit, the rich and the poor, those the elite of the day viewed as throw aways! The kind of folk that don’t often get invited to parties! EVERYONE! This invitation excluded no one!

The guests arrive and are treated to a banquet, a party like no other. The finest of everything! There is laughter.

The music is loud and the dance floor is full. Can you hear the music?

Celebrate Good Times Come On!
Cause I’m Happy
Can you hear the celebration? Can you hear your favorite song?
Wait, there’s mine….We are family, I’ve got all my sisters with me!

The parable then comes to a jolting halt, the music stops, the room is silent as the host notices the unlucky guest who isn’t wearing the wedding garment.

I am from Louisiana and we have a party every year — we call it Mardi Gras others call it Carnivale.

The dress code is clear. Women must wear ball gowns to the floor. No short dresses, no tea length dresses; the invitation is clear — a dress to the floor is required for the ladies.

Men must wear a tuxedo — a black tuxedo. This is NOT a black tie optional event.

My invitation to this year’s Mardi Gras ball stated clearly that if you were not properly attired you would not be allowed into the ball. Surely a woman in a tea length dress or a man in a business suit at the Mardi Gras ball would not experience the same treatment as our friend at the banquet?

The ill-dressed man had no excuse. You see the host always provided the guests with the appropriate wedding garment or robe.
In weddings in the Ancient Near East, there was a rack of robes available at the entrance for anyone who needed the proper wedding robe — like there is at fancy restaurants that require men to wear a jacket.

Those late-comers — the fit and misfit, the ones from the edge of town, the ones from the other side of the tracks, from el barrio, the ones who spoke a different language, the poor, the prostitutes (yea those) — they were provided appropriate attire when they arrived.

I envision our unlucky guest in cut-off jeans and a t-shirt bellying up to the bar. It is not as if he had to rent a tuxedo he couldn’t afford — the robe is right there. All he has to do is put it on!

Early hearers of the parable might have had less difficulty with the inappropriately dressed guest than we do today. When they heard robe — they heard baptismal robe.

In baptism in the early Church, candidates for baptism, after being immersed in the waters of their baptism, would be brought up out of the water and clothed in a robe that signified their new life in Christ, that they were a new creation, participants in a new order.

They would know that this guy had committed more than a clothing faux pas. He had come to the party but failed to show honor to the host, he makes light of the occasion by failing to put on the garment of righteousness, the robe that is one size fits all and is available to anyone willing to put it on. It’s hanging right there at the entrance. No alterations needed.

I am not sure it is about the robe at all. We can wear the right clothes and still not be properly attired.

God invites God’s people, you and me, to “Come as you are,” but not to stay as we are. We are to respond in faithful obedience.

Our showing up at the party, our standing before God, is about our willingness to receive, to put on, God’s grace.

Like any good preacher, Matthew crafted this parable to speak to his specific congregation: a church with two factions: Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Imagine his coming into the fellowship hall with a center aisle and folding chairs on each side filled with his contentious congregation.

The only thing both groups had in common was that neither one thought they had to do anything except criticize the other.
The Jews said, “We have Abraham as our father. We can rest on our religious pedigree.”

The Gentiles said, “We are saved by grace, with no need to adhere to the rituals of the Jews.”

As Matthew walks down the aisle toward the front to share this parable he hears the Jewish Christians on one side trash talking the Gentile Christians “We were here first.” And the Gentiles responding with their trash talk, “Yeah, but God saved the best for last!”

This banquet the one in the parable AND the banquet we gather for here in Portland is a call to new life — a new way of being — this banquet is for those who have showed up, ready to put on the wedding garment, the robe of righteousness.

It is for those who are ready to do something new and to become something new.

It is for those for whom it matters that we are different at the end of all this.

This parable, like all of Jesus’ parables, is another one of those stories of reversal.

When the world’s values are turned upside down. When entering into the story, we are challenged to come as we are, but not stay that way.

We have each been personally invited to THIS banquet. We have been invited and expected to do something that even the world might not be expecting. Will we honor the host by taking the grace-lined garment off that rack and put it on?

Our host to this banquet, the one we call General Conference, is the God who is God even and especially when things get contentious. When we start drawing lines in our imaginary fellowship hall or convention center. When we get so hell bent on proving we are right and THEY are wrong.

Our host to this banquet is the God who demands we put on the wedding garment of righteousness. It is not optional!

Our host is the One who says, “It is no longer enough to give lip service” — it is time for you to work together, to do something – to honor our work.”

It is time to honor our host — and bear fruit for God’s sake.

This invitation is an urgent one. There is no excuse for not showing up. We cannot leave our grace-lined garment on that rack.
It matters that we are robed in the robe of righteousness, of faithfulness and obedience — and that we wear our robe like it matters!

Our host is the One who calls us and empowers us to disturb the system. Maybe even disturb our own human condition and put on the robe of righteousness, the robe of grace, the robe that is the outward and visible sign of our response to God’s deep faithfulness for God’s people.

This could just turn the world upside down. This is what it means to be people of the cross, people of the resurrection, Easter people!

People who are ready for a reversal — a world that is turned upside down.

A world that is transformed. A world where all God’s people experience an abundant life in Christ.

Could OUR banquet, right here, General Conference, be sign and symbol of the heavenly banquet? By the power of God, could it advance God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Could our banquet be a banquet where there is no more crying, no more pain?

Could this be the banquet filled with the things that really matter?

- Like a world free from addiction; where families are built on love and a trust that defies the headlines; where children do not die of diseases that can be prevented; a world where parenting is a joy not a burden;
- a world where children go to bed with full bellies; a world where women don’t have to sell their bodies or themselves to survive;
- a world where children are safe in schools; where everyone is paid a fair wage;
- where everyone is honored, respected and heard;
- where we mean it when we say that we are all God’s children; where loved ones are free from random mass shootings; where terrorists are no more?

**A world turned. Up. Side Down!**

I am convinced that if we are willing to erase the imaginary line in our imaginary fellowship hall or conference floor and put on the robe provided for each and every one of us regardless of where we are from — Central Conference, the
United States. Whether we are progressive or conservative, gay or straight, rich or poor, black, white, Latino, Philippino, fit or misfit, broken or not.

We will experience transformation that will turn the world upside down.

The robe is ready for you.

There is one for each of us.

Let’s put it on!

And dance…

Because there is a party going on!