

Dress Up

Matthew 22:1-14

I remember back in 2008, a few months after I moved to Ohio, my wife and I were invited to a concert at a church. It was around this time of the year (October). Actually, it was more like around Halloween (you will see why I remember this specific detail). Not knowing the culture well enough, I thought this was a formal event. So, I dressed up.

I put on trousers and a jacket, got in the car with my wife and Ludwig who was really little then, and headed to the church where the concert was. On the way, we stopped at a store to get a few things we needed. I remember going to the cash register to pay when I noticed several people looking at me. It made me wonder, but I thought to myself, *“I am looking good and people cannot help but show admiration.”*

As I was finishing the transaction, I also noticed that people were dressing funny. After a few moments of wondering what was going on, we realized that people were wearing their Halloween costumes. We got in the car, went to the church, and as soon as I entered the welcoming area I noticed that I was overdressed for the occasion. For some reason, I felt like the anachronistic figure in the room.

I also noticed that some people gave me the same “wondering look” I received at the store. However, this time was different. My ego was not that big anymore. That’s when I realized that I was not looking as good as I thought; I was “unfashionable” for the occasion. Then, the light bulb came on and I understood that people were looking at me not because I was looking good, but because they could not tell if I was dressed up or wearing a Halloween costume. Have you ever been in a situation similar to mine?

The gospel story we heard this morning tells of a king who invited several people to the wedding banquet that he prepared for his son. The reason I mention fashion and dress code is because towards the end of the story we hear of someone who was not dressed appropriately for the occasion and was kicked out of the banquet. Yet, there are important elements one needs to consider before getting to the fashion part (the dress code) of this parable. Perhaps, the most important thing to keep in mind is that Jesus told this parable to describe the Kingdom of Heaven: *“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son”* (v. 2).

Traditionally, the parable has been understood as an allegory. Here is what this means: each of the characters and elements of the parable are symbols of something else. For instance:

1. The king represents God the Father.
2. The king’s son represents Jesus Christ.
3. The wedding banquet points to the great marriage feast mentioned in Revelations 19.
4. The king’s slaves are the prophets.

5. The wedding hall is the church.
6. Those first invited to the wedding banquet are the leaders and people of Israel who rejected Jesus.
7. The second group invited to the wedding banquet represents the Gentiles invited to be part of the church.
8. The wedding robe is a symbol of the Christian life.¹

Even though the parable has been understood as an allegory, we cannot approach it only at this level. If we do, we will miss the point of the parable. We will overlook the call of God through this passage to our lives.

I want to share the Good News I find in this text. Through the parable, I see that:

1. God is persistent and generous...
 - a. The king turned the grill on and made more than enough food for his guests to come and join him. Even after the rejection, the king continued to invite others to the banquet.
 - b. Here is a fact I love about this parable: No RSVP was needed to come to the banquet.
 - i. I like the fact that there is no RSVP in this parable, because it points to the truth that in the kingdom of God there is abundance, and there is more than enough for whoever wants to come.
2. The invitation to come to the banquet was not limited to a certain group of people.
 - a. I love the request the king made to his servants: “*Go out to the streets and invite to the banquet **anyone** you find*” (v. 9).
 - b. This request reminds me of John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever** believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”
 - c. The servants did what they were commanded to do and brought to the marriage feast “*the bad as well as the good*” (v. 10).
 - d. The kingdom of God is not just for a specific group of people. It’s not only for those who may seem to have their act together, or those who have figured life out. The kingdom of God is for everyone. The bad, the good, and everything in between. In his goodness, God makes more than enough room for all people. No one is excluded. You and I have a place. The invitation is freely offered to everyone.
3. God wants nothing more than for the wedding hall to be full of people.

¹ Lester, Carter. 2008. "Matthew 22:1-14." *Interpretation* 62, no. 3: 308-310. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2017).

You may be wondering, how can God, who wants everyone to come to the marriage feast, be so picky about fashion? Why would the king kick someone out of the banquet who does not have the right outfit, someone who did not spend hundreds of dollars on wedding attire? What's going on here? There seems to be some inconsistency between the king's desire and the king's actions.

Well, we need to keep in mind that this parable was told by Jesus, but the version we get in the gospel is the one that was told by Matthew. Perhaps, Matthew's point in retelling Jesus' parable is to admonish and challenge a church that contains "both good and bad" (v. 10). Matthew was speaking to people who had accepted the invitation to the banquet and his point was: "*accepting the invitation requires the willingness to change.*"

When you carefully read the story, you realize that "the wedding guest's problem is not that he has spent too little on his clothes; the guest's problem, instead, is that he does not recognize the need to change in response to the king's invitation."² The point being made in the narrative is: *Simply showing up with an invitation is not enough; we need to show up with the right attitude and a willingness to change and honor the host.*

The king spotted the guy from afar. I imagine that this guest looked like I did in at concert I went to. Both of us were the anachronistic figures of our respective events. So, the king got closer and asked the guest: "*why are you dressed like that? Why did you not change to come to the wedding?*"

The man was speechless; he had no excuse to give. (i.e. I am new in the country and I am not fully familiar with the social dress code yet). If he had a good excuse, why he did not vocalize it? Was he timid? Well, you better speak up when you are standing before the king. How should we interpret the guest's silence?

- Is he ignoring the king? or,
- He does not care and is thinking to himself, "I just came to have a good time, that's it."
- Didn't he think that in the first place his careless action was showing the actual amount of respect and honor he had for the king?

Today, the message is as loud and clear as it was the first time it was shared: God's grace is freely offered to all people alike, the good and the bad. Grace knocks at the door of everyone with the invitation to enter into God's kingdom. Still, the decision to step into God's kingdom should not be taken lightly. It should be made with full awareness that it requires our willingness to change.

The apostle Paul exhorted early Christians with these words: "*Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ...*" (**Romans 13:14 NIV**). Today, we are not talking about dressing up in the literal sense of the phrase. We are talking about putting on righteousness, putting on Christ.

² Ibid.

What does it mean to put on Christ?

I think the scripture from the book of Colossians that we read earlier this morning gives us a hint of what it means to put on Christ. As we accept the invitation to be participants of God's kingdom, we need to "*clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience...¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity*" (**Colossians 3**).

For many years, it was the tradition of new converts to Christianity to wear brand new clothes immediately after their baptism. For them, it was a sign that they were new persons. It was a sign that they had put the old life to death and had risen to a new life in Christ. It was a sign that they were entering the kingdom of God with intentionality.

The invitation to enter God's kingdom is given to us by grace. Even though God's grace is freely given to all, such grace is not cheap and should not be treated as common property. God's grace is free, but it challenges and, as the old hymn says, "demands my soul, my life, my all."³

I believe the text is telling us that keeping our old clothes will disqualify us as participants and citizens of the kingdom of heaven. We cannot keep tripping on destructive cycles and negative habits our entire lives. We cannot keep playing by the rules of fear, self-interest, revenge, and other dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors when we accept the invitation to enter the kingdom of love and generosity.

As I was pondering on the topic for today, the account of Jacob putting on the clothes of his brother Esau to receive his father's blessing came to mind. As Jacob put on Esau's clothes, Isaac, the father of the twins, could not distinguish between Esau and Jacob. Therefore, the blessing of Esau was given to Jacob.

Jacob was tricking his father, but we don't need to trick God. Actually, God is asking us to put on Christ, because when we clothe ourselves with Christ, God the Father does not see or smell our imperfections. The Father sees all over us the righteousness of Jesus. Because God sees in us the righteousness of Jesus, blessings are poured out on us.

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "*Praise be to the **God** and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ***" (**Ephesians 1:3**).

God's invitation calls us to put on new clothes, to put on Christ. We put on Christ through faith, by making Jesus our Lord and Savior, by responding to God's grace with awe and obedience. Becoming a Christian should make a discernible difference in our lives. Perhaps that is why the

³ Isaac Watts, "*The United Methodist Hymnal : Book of United Methodist Worship*," (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 1989), 298.

first invitees stayed away from the wedding banquet. They feared having to make the changes that the invitation demands.

God invites you today. The invitation we receive is not something to throw away like junk mail. Instead, we are called to run immediately and change because we are invited to a party, a feast of great wonder and joy that we do not want to miss.

Dress up!!! Put on Christ!!!