

“God’s Dress Code”
Colossians 3:13-17/ Matthew 22:1-14

One month ago today, I walked our daughter down the aisle.

More precisely, I escorted her up the driveway beside Andrews Hall and down the middle of Mechanics Street until we stopped underneath DPC’s bridge where her beloved awaited. The original plan for Emsley and Bryan’s wedding had been for it to occur in this sanctuary on a Saturday in April with over 200 people in attendance. Invitations had been sent and acceptances received, the bridal shower held and details set for the bachelorette weekend, yet then everything stopped. For weeks, they waited until COVID restrictions eased and then started over with the planning. All of the vendors were still available, a significantly reduced list of attendees took shape, the police chief agreed to close that one-way corridor behind me, and the borough, in a perfectly timed coincidence repaved the road. Thus, on a Friday in September, the two of them made their vows to each other on a street and the celebration that followed endures.

While certainly that sermon opening could be viewed as nothing more than the joyful memory of this father-of-the-bride, I would contend that a street wedding in Doylestown actually shares some themes with a parable from Jerusalem. In both, wedding plans are adjusted after everything is set. In both, the original guest list is modified and a great party occurs. Yet unlike the events of last month, in that story from Jesus there is great uncertainty when it all concludes.

That instructional tale was spoken as the third consecutive parable to Jewish leaders who had challenged his right to teach in the Temple. We have focused on the two previous stories here in recent weeks and in both of them, Jesus, as was his norm, took some everyday images or practices and gave them new meaning. The setting for each of those stories was agricultural while in today’s parable the events unfold before, during, and after a wedding banquet.

In that era, it was common practice for such a celebration to be preceded by two invitations—the first coming days or weeks prior in order to finalize the list of attendees and the second on the day of the banquet itself, when those who have agreed to come are informed that all is ready. In this parable, Jesus tells of a king who is hosting a wedding banquet for his son and as the story opens, everything is ready for the celebration. He sends word to the guests who had already accepted the invitation, yet all of them now refuse to come. The king sends another message literally to whet their appetite: “I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves ...come to the wedding banquet,” but they make light of it. Violence breaks out against the servants and would-be guests and the king sends out his representatives a third time with word to “invite everyone you find.” Soon the banquet hall fills, but he spots a guest without the proper attire. “Friend, how did you get in here without a robe?” The man cannot answer the king and is tossed out of the banquet before Jesus concludes: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

It’s a troubling and confusing parable, yet the first thing we can safely say is that it is not the account of some literal wedding banquet that went off the rails. Instead, most scholars agree that, like the parable heard last Sunday where the kingdom of God is taken from some and given to others, so is this story an allegory about salvation history, too. In it, the king—God--sends an invitation to attend that banquet, a frequent Biblical image for the celebration at the end of time. Those who had originally accepted the offer now refuse and thus the opportunity goes to others—recalling the shift in the Good News from being only for Jews to include Gentiles, too. Yet this parable moves ahead with a glimpse of the Messianic banquet when the last judgment

takes place and one guest is thrown evoking what Jesus calls great “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” a phrase used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of those final events.

Certainly, there is much in that allegory worthy of our attention, but I’d like for us to focus on the one who was ultimately cast out from the banquet. That outcome is attributed to his not wearing a wedding robe and even for a fictional account, it is ludicrous to expect someone invited at the last-minute to have had in his possession the right clothing for a wedding just in case he was invited. Thus, the question is one of what Jesus meant in that image of a robe; what does it say to us about God’s dress code for eternity? Let me suggest one possibility.

Our culture is known to say that “clothes make” a man or woman. When invited to a social event, wedding or otherwise, we can inquire as to the expected attire: formal or semi-formal, casual or business casual. In the case of this parable, it seems fair to trust Jesus is speaking about something other than our literal fashion choices for the kingdom and instead most commentaries conclude that he is using the image of a wedding robe to speak to how we are to live as his followers. That just as one would wear typically different clothes to a wedding so are we to be changed after we have accepted the invitation of faith.

Our first Biblical reading explains that idea. Written by Paul to believers in Colossae our passage comes from a chapter often entitled “The New Life in Christ.” Listen again to the imagery Paul uses. “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” He encourages those believers to forgive each other in the same style that they have been forgiven by God and then concludes, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

I often use that text as final words at a wedding and did so with Emsley and Bryan last month for to clothe oneself in love is an appropriate charge to a couple. Yet Paul’s words, coming from one who never married himself are meant for everyone in the more ordinary moments of life, too, as he uses the imagery of clothing to speak of the kind of changed existence our faith is meant to reveal.

For in offering that analogy, Paul knew those first generation Christians could make different fashion choices, that instead of wearing compassion or kindness they could put on judgment or cold-heartedness. That instead of being clothed with humility or patience they could choose outfits of pride or impetuosity. Paul knew that one’s life—one’s clothes--did not immediately change in the moment of professing faith in Christ, but instead that bit by bit, or fabric by fabric, persons were to clothe themselves more fully in God’s intention.

That seems to have been the problem for the man tossed out of that wedding banquet for when confronted by the king about his clothing—his behavior--he had no answer. Maybe he had come to the party only because he was caught up in the excitement and was not going to pass up a free meal. Maybe he had seen friends join in and feared missing out, or because it seemed like the wise thing to do since it was the king’s son after all. Persons have always come to faith in Christ or become part of his church for a wide variety of reasons, but no matter how it begins, that step is only the start. For while we are saved by grace and not our works, such an invitation is still meant to bring about a change in our behavior. Our faith is intended to be evident in how we spend our money and our free time, to shape our speech and relationships, and to be revealed in how we work and how we vote. In sum, we are to be clothed differently because of our faith.

Thus, one scholar explains the one removed from that banquet by saying: “the wedding garment of personal righteousness was not necessary to be invited to the party...but was

necessary in order to stay in the party." (Bruner, Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990, p. 777). Without that ongoing resolve for or insight into faithful living that man had not fully accepted the invitation. He certainly was not the last one to do so.

George Burns, the beloved entertainer from the 20th century, once made that point in recalling an event from childhood. "When I was 7 years old," he said, "I was singing with three other Jewish kids from the neighborhood. We called ourselves the Pee Wee Quartette. A local department store held a talent contest representing all the local churches. When the Presbyterians had no one to enter, the minister asked the four of us to represent them. There we were, four Jewish boys, sponsored by a Presbyterian church and our opening song was 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.'...We...won first prize. The church got a purple velvet altar cloth and each of us kids got an Ingersol watch worth about 85 cents. I was so excited I ran all the way home to tell my mother. She was on the roof hanging out wash. I hollered out, 'Mama, I don't want to be a Jew anymore.' She calmly said, 'Do you mind my asking why?' 'Well,' I said, 'I've been a Jew for seven years and never got anything. I was a Presbyterian for 15 minutes today and I already got a watch.' My mother answered, 'First help me hang up the wash. Then you can be a Presbyterian.'" (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 26, 1996, p. 2) While Burns did not follow-up on that plan for conversion, his enthusiastic response points us back to that parable from a first-century Jew.

As it's only fitting that the image Jesus uses for persons who accept God's invitation is a party for when a person takes that first steps toward faith it is cause for celebration. When someone finds a church home where they feel welcomed and challenged or when parents reaffirm their faith by presenting a child for baptism, it is reason to rejoice. When a teenager makes the choice to confirm promises made on their behalf years before, when one whose faith has grown dull is inspired by new signs of divine care or when one stands up for a different way because of Jesus' teachings, it is time to give thanks. And at the same time, to pay attention to our own spiritual attire so that we might ever more fully be dressed as God intends, too.

Or, as another believer put it, to "clothe [ourselves] with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."