

What Not To Wear

The Rev'd John Drymon
Saint Paul's, Batesville
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 23, Year A
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Matthew 22:1-14

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

About fifteen years ago a great film called *As Good as it Gets* came out. It starred Jack Nicholson as a man trying to woo a woman with whom he had fallen in love, played by Helen Hunt, while he deals with a rather severe case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. One of my favorite scenes from the film has the couple going to a restaurant which, as it turns out, has a dress code requiring men to wear jackets. Nicholson's character had come unprepared, but the maître d' assures him that the restaurant has jackets to lend such unprepared diners. The character's OCD, however, makes him extremely uncomfortable wearing a loaner jacket, so he leaves his date at the restaurant and

frantically drives around town trying to find a haberdasher so he can buy a jacket for himself- not a particularly romantic gesture, to say the least.

There is an obvious lesson here, one which was drilled in to my head way back when I was a boy scout: be prepared. I suppose one could amend that by saying, "either be prepared or be flexible." Clearly Nicholson's character was neither. Nor was the fellow in this morning's Gospel, the poorly dressed man at the wedding banquet.

I believe that the parable we just heard must be the most bizarre of Jesus' parables. It starts out predictably enough. It seems a rather simple allegory at first. There were those invited to the banquet (representing the children of Israel), and the king's slaves (representing the prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New) go out to remind them that they had better come, but they refuse. So, the slaves go out and recruit all sorts and conditions of men-both bad and good-to take the

place of the missing guests. This motley group of people is us- the saints and sinners who have been given Grace to attend the feast here at our altar and in the Kingdom on the last day. It all seems simple enough.

But then Jesus throws us a curve ball, as it were. Who in the world is this poorly dressed guest and why does the king deal so harshly with him? If you were to show up at the Union League club in jeans or tennis shoes they might throw you out, but they wouldn't bind you and cast you out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (though, I suppose for some who frequent fancy clubs, getting one's lunch at the hotdog stand outside might be one's idea of hell). We might think that the caliber of guests who finally showed up at the banquet would mean that many were uncouth enough to forgo a wedding robe or simply too poor to own one! At first blush, the king seems rather capricious and uncharitable.

Biblical scholars have engaged in a great deal of hand-waving to try to explain this. Some have suggested that the wedding robe would have been a garment which a host would provide for those who came without one, like those loaner jackets restaurants have. If that were the case, the guest in question must have refused to follow a dress code when compliance would have been easy enough. The truth, though, is that we just don't know enough about the customs of First Century Palestine to say for certain if this would have been the case.

Fortunately, I don't think a knowledge of ancient wedding practices really matters so much in this instance. What we have here is not a run-of-the-mill parable, but an allegory in which the symbols don't necessarily have a perfect relationship to the realities they symbolize. What matters is not how precisely wedding robes were distributed but the fact that the guest doesn't

have one on. Our work, then, is to figure out what the robe symbolizes.

There are two prevailing theories from the most ancient of Christian writers, which I will present as objectively as possible and permit you to come to your own conclusion. In the interest of full disclosure, I'm not sure which of these views I personally agree with.

The first is found in St. John Chrysostom in his homily on this text says that while the invitation is "grace" the garment is "life and practice". Others, St. Augustine among them, would agree. The implication of this view is that one's response to Grace, namely Faith as it is manifest in good works, is necessary if we are to attend the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the heavenly banquet. To comply with the dress code of heaven, we must weave a robe with the threads of righteousness. This meshes nicely with the *Epistle of James* which those in our adult Sunday School studied last month.

"Faith without works is dead," says James. I have no problem with this view, but I am (as some of you know) thoroughly unreformed. Those who hold a theology more influenced by the Reformation than mine will not find this view satisfactory.

Ireneaus and Tertullian hold the opposite view. The wedding garment itself is Sanctifying Grace freely given. We may, of course, take off the garment, like the wedding guest, but it's given to us in Baptism whether we want it or not. It is notable that in the Baptisms of the Early Church, the baptizand—whether infant or adult—would be baptized naked. For adults being baptized, this would mean only Christians of their own gender would be present for the Baptism, and it's likely the reason for the ordination of female deacons from very early in the church's history. Anyway, after emerging from the water, the new Christian would be clothed in a white robe to symbolize his regeneration—his status as a new creation. While

we cannot know for certain, it is possible that this practice is as ancient as *St. Matthew's Gospel*. If so, the wedding garment in this parable might be not-too-subtly related.

So, I've left you with a question and two compelling but non-cotenable answers to choose from. I apologize for the lack of closure this creates in a sermon, but I encourage you to reflect on the question and most of all to pray. Pray that, whatever that wedding robe is meant to symbolize, we'll see plenty of people following the heavenly dress code on that day when we reach the other shore. Thank heavens scripture tells us we will see a multitude dressed in white before the throne, all sorts and conditions being summoned from the highways of this old world to attend the greatest wedding feast of all.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.