

“Dress Code”
Matthew 22:1-14, Isaiah 25:1-9
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Reformation Sunday
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Did you ever have a dress code in school? Did you go to a private or a religious high school where you had to all wear the same thing? We had a dress code in school, but it was unspoken. I went to high school in Colorado in the 1970s and there was an unspoken dress code for the guys in my school. If you wanted to be taken seriously, you had to wear straight legged Levi's 501 jeans with waffle-stomper hiking boots. Those are the kind of boots that when you make a footprint in the snow, it leaves a track that looks like a waffle. Then you had to wear a colored t-shirt and over that a flannel shirt and then over that a jean jacket. Over all that you wore a sleeveless down vest which was the only thing that was taken off during school hours. But that was the uniform for cool guys in my school. If you wanted to look cool, that's what you wore, day in and day out. If you weren't wearing that, you weren't anybody.

This parable is—in part—about having a dress code. But this is not an easy parable. And this continues our series of difficult parables, and this one really is. But let's be honest, not only is this parable uncomfortable, it's really a mess. Like last week's story of the wicked tenants in the vineyard, this is an allegory. A parable is a story with a point, but an allegory is more. An allegory is a story where all the elements in the story are supposed to have correspondence with real life. This allegory is Matthew's attempt to say something about his understanding of salvation. In this story there is a king who gives a banquet for his son. The usual understanding is that the king is God and his son is Jesus. That seems pretty simple. Then the people who are invited to the banquet are God's people, the people of Israel. The unsuccessful servants who go to bring them to the dinner are the prophets, who are mistreated and even killed. So our nice kindly king who wants to throw a party for his son gets angry, sends in his

troops and kills those who were invited and burns their city. Not nice! But we need to remember in reading this that Matthew is writing a few years after the Roman troops have gone into the holy land and done just that. They have destroyed Jerusalem and tore down its walls and burned down the temple. He is trying to make sense of the most momentous and religiously upsetting event of his time. But then, later in the parable, the king has his servants go out and invite everyone in so the seats will be filled at his banquet. This is Matthew's understanding that the good news is now preached to everyone, Jew and Gentile, that no one is excluded from the banquet. God is graceful. Amazingly so. That part I like, the death and destruction not so much.

Unfortunately, later Christian history has not used this parable in such an inclusive way. This is one of the texts that for centuries was interpreted as Jesus saying that God had turned his back on the Jews. Theologians called this "superseccionism" the idea that Christians had replaced the Jews. Too often this idea led to the persecution of one's Jewish neighbors. They seem to have ignored the verse that says that the servants compelled *all* people to come into the banquet. Matthew's community saw that the good news of God's love was being preached now to Jew and Gentile alike.

So, I don't always like this parable, I don't like how it's been interpreted by the church for centuries, I wish Matthew would have put a different emphasis on what I suspect was a more inclusive parable. "The slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad." Everyone gets invited. No one gets left out. That's grace.

Five hundred years ago, when Martin Luther saw that the church needed to be reformed, it was grace that drove him. The bishops and cardinals of the European church were busy selling indulgences, ways to buy oneself out of purgatory and to get to heaven. Luther believed that salvation was not by what we could buy or not through works but only by grace. That invitation to the banquet was free. That

part of this story I like.

But we started today with the idea of a dress code. And just because we're all breathing a little easier now, in the idea that this parable is about grace, we still have to wrestle with that pesky part about the guest who shows up underdressed. The king comes up to one of the guests who is not wearing a wedding robe, and asks him what he thinks he is doing coming into the banquet without the proper clothing, and he tosses him out into the street. What in the world does this mean? Wear your best clothes to church or else we won't let you in? I don't think so. I'm sure that Matthew meant this as a warning to his own community not to get complacent. Even though the invitation to the wedding banquet of the Son is open to all, literally the doors are thrown wide open, if you accept the invitation, there are expectations. What are the expectations? What does God want from us? What does this wedding robe signify? Is it a metaphor?

Last week we talked about being the vineyard of the master. Our lives, our marriages, our families, our congregation, are vineyards in which seeds have been planted. What is growing in our vineyards? You have again the little schematic of an input-output system, but this time I wrote in the fruits of the Spirit as Paul tells us about in Galatians. That's what should be coming out of the vineyards—not bigger churches or buildings or larger budgets, but love, joy, peace and the rest.

This parable is almost the same point. When we are at the wedding feast, what do we wear? Again, we go back to the words of Paul, this time from Colossians: “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.”¹ Clothe yourselves. Come as you are, but put these things on. This almost sounds like the fruits of the spirit, doesn't it? Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. That's what the folks at

1 Colossians 3:12

the banquet should be wearing. That's what the church should be wearing. That's what we should wear. The invitation to the banquet is free. Everyone is welcome. But if you come, this is what you need to wear.

The first real church job I ever had was as a junior high youth leader in Spokane, Washington. I got a hundred dollars a month to lead a weekly group of thirty seventh and eighth graders. One thing that I will always remember was that as I began that job, the pastor of the church asked me what kind of things I wanted the kids to know during that year. I had a lot of great ideas; I wanted them to learn some about the Bible, I wanted them to know the story of Jesus, I wanted them to have a heart for others less fortunate than themselves. The pastor looked at me and said, "all that is great, but that's not what the kids want to know. Every teenager that walks into the church has one question burning inside them. Am I ok? Do you like me? Every one of them who steps into this church should receive unconditional acceptance."

I've never forgotten that. And I don't think it has changed. And I don't think it's just for teenagers. Unconditional acceptance. Everyone is invited, everyone is welcome. If the church doesn't communicate that message, then it is not being the church. God loves us just as we are. But we have to clothe ourselves according to Paul. Just showing up is not enough. When we had that youth group all those years ago, everyone was welcome and loved. But if they were there, they had to treat each other well too. The church had to be a safe place for everyone. They were expected to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek and patient. Being a Christian, being in the church, has a dress code. And we do too.

In 1736 at age 11, a rather difficult young Englishman, whose mother had died when he was only 7 years old, joined his father and went to sea as an apprentice sailor. For the next 12 years he seems to

have learned a great deal about being a sailor and an equally great deal about being one of the most profane men his shipmates had ever met. He was disobedient to his captains, drunk whenever he could, profanity filled his language and he even deserted for a time. He was punished by being made to join the Royal Navy, where he deserted again, was given lashes and eventually traded to a slave ship. That's where he began his real career as a slave trader. But in 1748, his ship was caught in a storm off the coast of Ireland, so rough that it swept a crew member overboard where our sailor had been standing only a moment before. In his despair, he cried out to God for mercy. He spent the next 11 hours at the wheel, trying to save the ship. After two weeks the battered ship and starving crew finally made safe landfall in Ireland, and our sailor began to contemplate God's mercy in saving him and his ship. He continued to work in the slave trade, but he was never really the same. In 1755, he became ill and had to leave the sea. He married and got involved in a church, so involved that he eventually became an Anglican priest. But his years working in the slave trade haunted him, and God's grace and mercy were never far from his mind. In 1772, he put some of those thoughts on paper and wrote a poem. He eventually became a spokesman against the slave trade and John Newton's poem was set to music and it is estimated that "Amazing Grace" is sung or performed more than 10 million times a year.²

It is a testament to the very parable that we just read. That God's grace is amazing in its depth and breadth—everyone is invited to the banquet, Jew and Christian, women and men, slave and free—as Luther would say, echoing St. Paul, for by grace you have been saved, through faith, this is the gift of God. But grace is also demanding. It doesn't let us stay in our slave ships. John Newton couldn't clothe himself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience and still remain a slave trader. The banquet is open to everyone, the church is open to everyone, but we are commanded to love one another. Everyone gets into the banquet, but then we put on Christ, and our lives are changed.

² You can read more about John Newton in the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200149085/>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, God's grace is free, but it is not cheap. It cost God his son. It costs us our whole lives as well.