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Exodus 32: 1 – 14
Philippians 4: 1 – 9

Psalm 106: 1 – 6, 19 – 23
Matthew 22: 1 – 14

When I was growing up, people went to church every Sunday and we got dressed up to go to church. It's what you did. I remember being 5 or 6 and coming downstairs every Sunday to find the row of shoes that my father had polished. A few years later, when I had learned to sew, I delighted in making my dresses for Easter. A few years after that, I remember my mother wrestling with whether or not to wear pants to church on a very cold, snowy, winter Sunday. Women just didn't do that. A number of years after that, my cousin, Susie, told me that one Sunday while she was dressing for church, her daughter, Jenna, who was four and always a fashionista, had come in and eyed her from head to toe, put her hands on her hips, and said, "Mom, you can do better than that!"

Our culture has changed greatly in the last several decades and we are much more casual than we used to be. As a congregation, we are a fairly laid-back, casual group of folks, but on any given Sunday, you'll see a variety of attire. And it's all good. Because it means that we are comfortable when we come here. But it's probably also why we don't understand, or perhaps don't *want* to understand, the point in today's parable from the Gospel of Matthew.

Many of us hear this parable from Jesus about the King throwing a wedding for his Son and we are puzzled, curious, or perhaps even shocked. The King sends out invites to the "A" list people, all of whom snub him. So, the King has his servants go invite anyone else they can find off of the streets – the B, C and even D list folks. And they come! Everyone is fine, swilling the King's best champagne, enjoying the steamship roast beef and the boiled shrimp, when suddenly there is a roar of outrage from the King, and the orchestra screeches to a halt. The King has suddenly noticed that there is one man who has come in inappropriately attired for the occasion. In fact, the man is wearing a powder blue polyester double-knit leisure suit. The King's guards toss the man out into outer darkness.

Why the furor over what the man is wearing? And what does the King expect? He has invited people off the streets, people in the middle of their everyday lives, who respond positively to his invitation, unlike the first group. How are they supposed to get all dolled up for the occasion when the invitation was to drop whatever you're doing and come now?

This isn't really the only part of the parable that doesn't make sense to us. A five-year-old would know that once the beef is cooked and the corks popped, there is not time to go and wage war and burn down a city. Your *own* city at that. And would people actually go out and beat up and kill the mail carrier who is simply delivering the engraved invitations to their mail box? We would hope not.

All in all, this is a very strange story. It's easy to get bogged down in the oddities. So, a few things. First, Matthew, in writing this Gospel, clearly wants us to know that this is an allegory. Things don't have to add up quite right because the message is more important than the details. We can probably work out the allegory without much problem: King = God; King's Son = Jesus; wedding banquet = life in the Kingdom of God. The point that the allegory is making about the Kingdom of God is more important than the practicality of the story.

Secondly, it helps to know the context in which this story is placed. Why is Matthew writing the story this way? Well, perhaps it's the way that Jesus told it, but Jesus and Matthew are both familiar

with proper social etiquette. In a society where hospitality is so crucial, everyone knows it. A host sends out invitations a few weeks ahead so that folks can save the date. Then, the day of the party, a reminder is sent around that the party is tonight! So, the first folks have had advanced notification. They have known all along about the wedding party. They don't have an excuse for not being ready and being there.

Thirdly, the point of the story is rooted in the deep disappointment. Jesus' disappointment, Matthew's disappointment forty years on in the early church, that so few people are saying "Yes!" to Jesus' invitation to participate in a new life in God. So, Matthew adapts the history of the people of God to this party paradigm. God sends out the invitations well in advance via Abraham and Moses, the judges and the prophets, all through the centuries. The people of Israel keep saying, "Sure, we'll come!" But they never quite follow through. They never take the invitation seriously or respond consistently. So, the time comes for Jesus, for the wedding banquet, to happen, and God sends a reminder in the form of John the Baptizer, to say, "Hey! The party's now!" But the messenger is killed. Jesus comes anyway, the wedding banquet is now, and because those first invited haven't shown up, God throws the doors wide open to everyone on the street – tax collectors, prostitutes and even Gentiles.

Matthew is writing as people, good and bad, are coming in off of the street into the early church. His point is that the inclusion of these newcomers generates its own problems. Hence the man in the powder blue, polyester leisure suit. Some of the newcomers have joined the party without ever having had a history with the God of Israel. They don't know, or they don't understand, or maybe they just don't care about all that has gone before. Some of the newcomers think that they can just say "Thanks" and show up. Period.

Meanwhile, there are Christians who were first Jewish. Christians who are familiar with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Christians who understand that they, like their ancestors in Egypt, are strangers in a foreign land, at least metaphorically. But, and this is a big but, these Jewish Christians are still trying to work out exactly what it means for them to be free from the law in the sense that Jesus means it. So, between the johnny-come-latelys and the confused establishment, a crisis of discipline or practice has developed. There is a sense that anything goes. You show up to be with God pretty much like a "come as you are" party and nothing more is expected. Because of Jesus, everyone has a free pass. Everyone is welcome and nothing special is required of you. Welcome to the party and help yourself to whatever you want!

Wrong, says Matthew. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Matthew limits the "come-as-you-are" to just one person in the allegory, but Matthew says, "No, you cannot just show up and do whatever you want. Just because you have been invited at the last minute does not give you the excuse to act improperly or to not change. Yes, you're invited as you are, but there is an expectation to change. This is the King's banquet we're talking about, for heaven's sake! Where are your manners, Matthew is saying. You can do better than that!

Some historians suggest that it is the host's responsibility to provide the wedding garments. In which case, the question becomes, "why does this man refuse to wear it?" The fact that Matthew says that EVERYBODY else has on the proper garment indicates that this is this man's choice to be inappropriately attired. Why does he not show due respect for the King and for the occasion? Perhaps he thinks that he is doing the King a favor just by accepting the invitation and being there, filling up the hall and eating the food that would otherwise be wasted. Perhaps he just doesn't care and he shows up because it's the place to be. Perhaps he's just there to get whatever he can, like the champagne and

good food. No matter, whatever his reasoning, it is seriously flawed when it comes to what really matters and who is doing whom a favor. The man disrespects and disgraces himself, his host and the occasion by not changing. And we aren't talking simply wardrobe. It's his attitude and understanding. So, Matthew says, he's trussed up like a turkey and tossed out into the howling darkness.

We know that this is an allegory. We know that most things in it have some sort of symbolic meaning, including the wedding robe, the appropriate attire for the occasion. It isn't just the superficial idea of a tux and cummerbund or a beautiful, shimmering dress. Rather, the appropriate attire symbolizes a willingness to be already ready, already anticipating, already participating. It signifies an understanding of why one is even at the party. Wearing the wedding robe acknowledges the gift of the invitation as well as the one doing the inviting. The man isn't wrong because of his poor taste in clothing, but because he shows up thinking that it doesn't really matter, and that the king, if he even notices, won't care either.

So, what does that have to do with us, 2000 years later? Well, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the very same thing happens here every time we have a Eucharist. It may not yet be the heavenly banquet, she says, but it's sure enough the rehearsal dinner. Everyone off of all the streets and roads of Bulloch County is invited to come before the King every Sunday to celebrate in this foretaste of the wedding banquet. Some folks have to work at the hospital or at keeping us safe, and can't be here. But some turn down the invitation for what they perceive are better things – more sleep, sports, Starbucks, the NY Times crossword puzzle...We just happen to show up, but not because we are any better or worse than they are. We might even be the guy in the powder blue leisure suit, coming without any idea of why we're really here, or without any real commitment to participating fully in the invitation. Notice that the King's servants bring in EVERYONE, good and bad. So we probably shouldn't get too self-righteous.

This story, as you've probably figured out, doesn't really have anything to do with what we physically wear to church. It's about our understanding of why we are even here in the first place. It's about our understanding of the significance of the invitation and about our willingness and preparedness to participate in the Kingdom. It's about our willingness to change for God. Not just in the sweet by and by, but here and now. By saying "Yes!" to the invitation, we're saying we're willing to exchange our everyday, worldly clothes of power and control, of hate and prejudice, of fear and judgment, for Kingdom robes of justice and mercy and reconciliation.

Do we want to fill this hall with wedding guests? Well, sure! It'd be lovely to have this place jam-packed every Sunday with overflowing crowds. But, as Taylor says, the King, God, isn't just looking for warm bodies. Including us. God is looking for wedding guests that will rise to the occasion of honoring the Son of God. We can do that no matter what we're physically wearing, because our wedding robes are not made of tangible fabric. Rather, our robes are cut from the fabric of our lives. They are fashioned by God's loving grace that gives us patterns of seeking justice and peace, of respecting the dignity of every human being, of forgiveness and mercy, of stewardship of all that has been entrusted to us, of steadfast love. Not coincidentally, our wedding robes just happen to look a lot like our bright, white baptismal garments that clothe us in our new lives in Christ. They are more beautiful than we can ask or imagine. And, if we wear them all the time, we will always be ready for that wedding banquet whenever the invitation arrives!

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