



__ Accepts with Pleasure; __ Declines with Regret

Matthew 22:1-14

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I was all set to title this sermon, "Yes, There Is a Dress Code." But then I remembered the sign out front, the sign out front that thousands of New Yorkers walk by each day, the sign that always includes the title of the upcoming sermon. Now you, you've already heard today's Gospel reading, and so you have some idea of where a sermon by that name might be going. Out of context, however, "Yes, There Is a Dress Code" might feel rather unwelcoming and inhospitable. So I scratched it.

Matthew, the evangelist Matthew, he would probably grumble at my reasoning. After all, it is his Gospel that recalls Jesus telling the story of the wedding banquet and the underdressed guest.

I have such mixed feelings about this story. That said, just this morning, as I was walking to church, as I do most days, I passed by Starbucks, as I do more days than I'd care to admit. I stopped inside to pick up my mobile order when something happened to me that has never happened before. Two of us walked up to the counter at the same time, and said, in unison, "order for Jenny." My name (our name) is fairly common, but even still, it stopped both of us in our tracks. It stopped the barista, as

well. It turns out it was her first weekend on the job. Most of the workers there know me (again, we won't discuss why). And the barista looked at two identical cups that both simply said, "Jenny."

She looked at the cups, and she looked at us, and she called for backup from the register. Now, I am sure we could have figured it out on our own, but she was new, and a bit nervous. Working the register was Alphonse, who prefers to be called "A." "A" glanced up, took one look at us, and went back to the register. "The one on your left is for Jenny the preacher," he said. "The one on your right is for Jenny the nurse."

Now, if it had been any other day of the week, that might not have helped this young woman very much. But it's Sunday, and the two of us stood before her, one of us in blue scrubs, and one of us in a clergy collar.

"All right then," she said, and handed us our drinks. Sometimes, what we wear tells the world exactly who we are.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet, a wedding banquet for the king's son. Invitations go out to the Who's Who of the community.

But the invitation ... I'm not sure I would have wanted to receive one. If this story means what it says, an invitation to that particular table means you might end up encountering violence and murder; you might end up seated next to the best or the worst of society; you might end up tossed out if you don't dress appropriately; and finally, not for nothin', I can't help but notice that even if you survive all that, you still might end up going to bed hungry, because at no point in this story does the veal piccata actually make it onto even a single plate. Dinner is never served.

Yeah, I'd really rather skip this one.

The problem is that the king invites everyone. Literally everyone. Jesus goes out of his way to make sure that those who are listening to him realize just how scandalously broad the guest list has become. After being turned down by those on the original guest list, the king sends his servants out to gather not just some others, but all others. Everyone they could find — both the good and the bad. When the king wants to have a party, the king has a party. And at this party, everyone ends up worthy of an invitation.

And so the wedding hall is filled with guests. All seems right again in the ancient world for exactly one half of one verse. Because as soon as the king comes in to greet his guests, brimming with pride and joy that finally, there are people here to celebrate his son, as soon as he arrives, he notices a gentleman dressed ... how shall I say this ... he notices a man dressed almost as if he'd walked in right off the streets, almost as if when he'd left the house that day, he had no idea he'd end up at a royal wedding that evening.

Not interested in any further excuses, the king throws him out of the party.

This might be a good moment for a brief aside. When Jesus tells a story, he's not recounting what he saw happen yesterday or the day before that. He's relaying something of what it means to live the way God intends for us. And there's almost always a story behind the story. In the interest of time, I need to tell you the short version of the story behind the story. If you want the long version, I can tell you at coffee hour. The short version is this:

We need to remember, again, that we are hearing Jesus' parable through the editorial hand of Matthew. And in Matthew's community, there were a lot of long-time believers and a good number of new believers and ultimately the issue at hand was grace. The old-timers still had the Law etched on their hearts, and the new folks, well, some of them were showing up without understanding what it meant to show up. It was causing some controversy. That's the story behind the story.

To talk about this wedding banquet is to talk about the kingdom of heaven. And to talk about the kingdom of heaven is to talk about grace — God's invitation to God's people to be at God's party.

That's grace. But some of those invited were acting as if the invitation read, "Come as you are. No big deal, no fancy clothes, no etiquette, no RSVP, no problem."

But there was a problem. They'd forgotten whose party it was in the first place. Which meant they couldn't tell the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. They wouldn't know to call it that back then, of course. Those terms would come from Dietrich Bonhoeffer centuries later. But the idea holds, no matter what you call it. Cheap grace expects something for nothing. Sometimes everything for nothing. Costly grace knows that grace is unconditional, but it comes with expectation.

Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer says, "is forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, community without discipleship." Costly grace, he says, asks us to embrace a life of discipleship. It asks us to clothe ourselves in new way of being. Cheap grace asks, what can I get? Costly grace asks, because I have been given so much, what now can I give?

One of the sweetest weddings I ever officiated was a second marriage for the bride. Her first husband had died far too young, of cancer, leaving her a single mom of a baby boy. Over time, this couple met, and that baby boy became a toddler, and then a very opinionated five-year-old. It was important to both the bride and the groom that Owen be included in the ceremony. He was to serve as the Ring Bearer, and then stand next to his mother throughout the service. We had even prepared vows that included him. For weeks leading up to the service, every Sunday, Owen would stay after worship, waiting for the Sanctuary to clear out, so he could practice walking up and down the long center aisle. He was beyond excited for the wedding, and he took his responsibilities very, very seriously.

So I was surprised when, just before the rehearsal, I walked in to find Owen sobbing as his mother tried to comfort him. The groom took me by the elbow, led me a few feet away, and explained the problem. It turns out that sometimes, five-year old ears don't hear the nuance of the English language, and for all these months, Owen did not think he was going to be the Ring Bearer. He thought he was going to be the Ring Bear. As in, a brown furry creature that grunts and growls as it ambles its way toward the wedding party. A Ring Bear.

All this time, he thought he'd be dressing up like a bear. A miniature coat and tie were a

terrible substitute, and Owen could not be consoled. We ran through the rehearsal as quickly as possible, with a very sad little boy wiping at his eyes the entire time.

The next afternoon, as I checked in with the bride and groom, they handed me a liturgical vestment I had not worn before, and have not worn since.

They explained to me that more than anything, they wanted this day to be one Owen remembered with joy. And so, they said, they had reached a compromise. Owen would be walking down the aisle in his proper suit and tie ... and bear ears, fastened to a headband.

Owen was delighted with this arrangement, and he assured me very solemnly that he knew exactly when to walk down the aisle, and exactly how to hand me the rings, and exactly how to feel like a bear without acting like a bear.

What Owen didn't know is that as soon as he took his first step in the Sanctuary, the rest of the wedding party, pastor included, would don their own pairs of bear ears. And when the bride made her big appearance, she, too, would have bear ears somehow worked into her hair.

It wasn't proper wedding attire. But it was the right wedding attire. I have never looked so ridiculous. And I have never seen a little boy smile so big for so long.

To some, the whole lot of us probably looked as out of place with our bear ears as the king's wedding guest looked in his shorts and sandals with his shirttails hanging out. To assume that, however, is to miss the point entirely.

You see, the king's guest ... my friend Tom puts it this way: "He isn't thrown out because he refuses to change his clothes. He's

thrown out because he refuses to change his heart.”

Just like food is never just about food, in scripture, clothes are never just clothes. In the early church, when new converts were baptized, they put on a new garment as part of the ritual. The old attire was left behind. It was a symbol of claiming a new identity, a new life.

That baptismal garment is what Paul has in mind when he writes to the church in Ephesus, “Clothe yourselves with the new self.” To the Colossians he writes, “Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, and patience.” And to the Galatians he says, “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

To be clothed with Christ is to be ready to live as a disciple, to be prepared to live a life of faith.

That is how one dresses at wedding banquet of the king. And even though this is still the rehearsal dinner, we do well to dress up even now.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet. It’s an important story. It declares that you are loved, and that the party, the feasting table, won’t be the same without you. It also declares that while God’s love comes to us where we are, love, real love, never leaves us as we are. Grace, real grace, costly grace, the grace of discipleship, the grace of the cross, the grace that will lead us home — it always asks something of us.

Friends, the invitation to the party, to the grand wedding banquet — the invitations have been issued. Will you accept with pleasure, or decline with regret? More importantly, what on earth are you going to wear?