

Oct. 9, 2011

“The Man Who Had No Wedding Clothes”

Matt. 22:1-14

The Kingdom of Heaven, it seems, is like a king who gives a wedding reception for his son. Hundreds of invitations have been sent out, mostly to high-born aristocrats and celebrities who usually get invited to royal gatherings. When the banquet is finally ready, the servants go out to let everyone know the doors are open. One-by-one, the guests begin to send along their excuses. “We’re too busy today. We have to wash our cars. We have to mow our lawns. In fact, some of the invitees get plain nasty about it, start roughing up the messengers, even kill a few. The king is upset, sends his army to punish the guilty ones.

But then...there he is with a great banquet set up, and no one to come. He can’t waste all that food! So the king sends his messengers out to the streets and towns. “Pull in anyone out there—even the poor folk—bring everyone in,” he said. “We’ll still have a party!” And so they begin to come in, all kinds of people, both good people and bad. They came to the banquet.

The king notices in the corner that this one man doesn’t have his wedding clothes on. He has him thrown out by the scruff of his neck. What’s wrong? It’s like God invites him...and God knows he’s poor, then throws him out because he can’t afford nice clothes! That doesn’t sound fair, does it? What’s happening here? *I have a theory.*

The Bible talks about clothes in a way that means something other than clothes. Ephesians talks about putting on the whole armor of God. It’s not really talking about a shirt made out of iron. Paul in Romans talks about “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus is not permanent press oxford cloth. Clothing used to be a metaphor for an attitude or a state of mind. Don’t some of you have a favorite shirt or jeans, and it fits perfectly...or it’s soft or warm? It makes you feel like a million bucks when you wear it! Somehow the world is right when you wear it? When you go to apply for a job, you don’t wear skuzzy clothes. You dress for success. If you dress confident, you feel confident. Clothes make a difference. The Bible reflects that from time to time. I think it does here, too.

We’re at a wedding reception. Weddings are a place of joy, of celebration. At a wedding, you don’t weep or complain or yawn. You dance! You laugh! You sing! You pick up three-year-old princesses and you swing them around the room as if they are Cinderella. You eat cake. Lots of it. You give thanks for the promises of people who give themselves to each other in love! You yell, “Hip! Hip! Hurrrraaaaay!” (You hopeless romantic!)

One of my favorite parts in the old movie *Fiddler on the Roof* was the wedding scene. These Jews were dirt poor. They didn’t have two pennies to rub together. But when a wedding came up, everyone put on their finest clothes. They brought

out their best wine. They served food they couldn't afford...lots of it! And the old men and the young danced with wine bottles on their heads and everyone laughed so hard they cried. Jesus at the Cana wedding replaced water with wine, and it wasn't the cheap stuff, either. Weddings are places where you celebrate the goodness of God and the goodness of love! You wear your wedding clothes. When you choose joy, it's like you're putting on wedding clothes.

So what was wrong with the man who wore no wedding clothes? Had he forgotten where he was? Who God is? It's like coming to church and sitting in the pews with a frown on your face! Where is the hope? Where is the power of grace and the deep, abiding love of Jesus? Have we forgotten what has happened here? This story is told to challenge the smugness of Matthew's readers, even if they are Christians. Church is no place for smugness. It's a place for joy! Billy Sunday once said, "Going to church does not make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car." God has made promises to us. God has given us life to live, hope to claim, forgiveness, and grace. We are royalty. But we must dress the part. We must act like royalty! We put on the clothes, so to speak!

The sense of it is like the story Garrison Keillor told in his book *Leaving Home*, about his memories of Lake Wobegon, Minn. Grace Tollefson married Alex Campbell back in the 1930s. They had three children, Earl, Marlys and Walter. Alex was a bit shiftless, and he bailed. Grace was forced to move back home to her family. One day, a letter came from Philadelphia, supposedly researching Scottish nobility. It asked about their ancestors. She wrote back about Alex Campbell and what she knew of his family. One day she got a letter back, addressed to "Your Royal Highness." It said, "*Today is the happiest day of my life as I greet my one true Sovereign Queen.*" It went on to say that Earl and Marlys and Walter were first in the line of succession of the House of Steward, the Royal Family of Scotland. The royal family of Scotland was living in a mobile home in Lake Wobegon, their furniture donated by the Lutheran Church.

Keillor wrote, "*They were astounded beyond words. Disbelieving at first, afraid to put their weight on something so beautiful, afraid it was too good to be true, and then it took hold—this was grace, pure grace that God offered them. Not their will but His. Grace. Here they were in the same dismal place, but everything had changed. They were different people.*"

Walter eventually discovered the whole thing was a fraud. He never told his family. Thinking you're royalty—whether everyone else knows it or not—changes a person. Years later, an aged Grace Tollefson said to her son, "*Oh, Walter, what would I do without you? You're so strong. You're so good to me. You're a prince, you know. You can put a crown on a dog and call it a prince, but you are a prince through and through. They may not know it, but they'll know it soon. Next year*

*we'll be in Edinburgh with the bands playing and the flags flying and the crowds cheering."*

Friends, we are royalty. First Peter says we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a peculiar people. Your neighbors may not know it, and our surroundings may be the same as anyone else's. But we're different. The table set before us is for royalty. It's the table of a wedding banquet, where the wine is nothing but the best and the bread is fit for a king. And the clothes we wear are clothes of joy, aren't they?