

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Party Clothes”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 28—October 15, 2017

Lessons: Philippians 4: 1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

There is a wonderful video that a friend shared with me recently that offers various reasons that people don't go to church. One voice says, “I can't come to church until I get my life together.” and then we see a marvelous hairdresser saying, “Church is how I got my life together.” A new voice says, “church is filled with a bunch of hypocrites,” and a burly pipe fitter responds, “and there's always room for one more.” Someone says, “all they care about is your money” to which a chief financial officer responds, “they care about me, not about my money” and the video says “People are priceless.” Then there's a voice that asks, “Is there some kind of dress code?” to which a mom responds, “Yes. The code is wear some clothes.”¹

It used to be that we all put on our Sunday best before coming to church and we were taught that we should dress up for God, that what we wore was a reflection of our faith, that the more formal the attire, the greater the faithfulness. I know a church not far from here where the elders, who at that time were all men, wore a proper cut-away, a formal morning suit, every Sunday, similar to what I wore on Easter here. The minister of that church worked hard to get them to be a little less formal and that wasn't easy as I understand it. Some people were very upset that they were making that change, but they did and he had a long and highly regarded ministry in that church. Then he retired and on his first Sunday of retirement, he came to visit the church where I was pastor, and because it was our Heritage Sunday I was wearing my cut-away, which I think was somewhat traumatic for that newly retired pastor, who had put so much energy into getting his elders to stop wearing cut-aways and he didn't come back. I am proud to be part of a community where the current dress code is just what that woman in the video proclaims: Our dress code is wear some clothes.

Today Jesus tells a story about a wedding banquet. The people who were invited didn't come, so the king invited some more and they didn't come. So he asked them again, and still they didn't come. Then he sent his people out into the streets to invite everyone they could find to come to the party. We might want to try that sometime: go out and walk through Westover Hills, the Highlands, Trolley Square and even down into the center of Wilmington as well as up into Greenville and Centerville and invite absolutely everyone you see. I fear that we'd make our fellowship committee a little nervous preparing a feast for that large a crowd, but we all could help and imagine the time we'd have. Everyone would be there. Wouldn't that feel great?

So everyone is present at the party, people who are good and people who are bad together. The hall is filled, but one person is wearing the wrong clothes. He can't hide any more than someone wearing black tie could hide amongst blue jeans and t-shirts or the other way around. A friend of mine told me this week of being invited to a party where the host said it would be casual, and he arrived wearing an open collared shirt with blue jeans and everyone else was in coat and tie and nice dresses. We know the embarrassment he must have felt.

Yet we are not ready for the response of the king in this story. We aren't ready for a king who burns down the city and kills his subjects because they won't come to his party and we aren't ready for a king who binds up this guy who isn't wearing his party clothes, throwing him into the outer darkness. If you are going to invite anybody off the street, don't expect them all to be wearing the right clothes. In churches today, we're so happy to see anybody new come through the doors, that we

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjaCh9qSaXc>

don't really care what they have on, just so long as they are here. This is supposed to be a story about the kingdom of heaven after all, so what is the king doing killing guests who are slow to accept his invitation and then throwing people out just because they aren't appropriately attired? What is this supposed to say about heaven?

It might help to know the story behind this story. The people who were invited but chose not to come are meant to represent the religious establishment who did not heed the call of God in Christ. They made light of it. The messengers who are killed are representative of the prophets who were killed for their message. The city that gets destroyed is representative of Jerusalem, which was destroyed by Rome in 70 A.D. Then, in large part because of the Apostle Paul, the community of faith was enlarged to include Gentiles—folks like us, the people who happened to be standing around and had the fun of being invited to a very fancy and wonderful party. They are invited not because they have great things to offer, although they may, but rather because the king wants to throw a party and needs the hall to be full. That still leaves us with the man who lacked proper wedding attire. He is meant to startle every listener, every reader of this story. He is meant to remind us that how we live our lives does matter.

The wedding garment is representative of life lived as God would have us live. Not every behavior is acceptable. Some of these last invited people were so excited to be welcomed at the feast, to be welcomed into the community of faith, that they behaved as if anything goes. They took God's invitation lightly, just like those first invited. "You can't do whatever you want," says the king. In this party, which we call the kingdom of heaven, we are expected to behave differently, to see ourselves and our world in a new way.

Desmond Tutu writes about this new way of life that is represented by the wedding gown. "God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion. In God's family, there are no outsiders, no enemies. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Buddhist—all belong. When we start to live as brothers and sisters and to recognize our interdependence, we become fully human."² Recognizing our place in the single human family is one way to wear a proper wedding garment.

The man without the proper wedding gown is meant to make us question whether we've got the right clothes on. The judgment that is pronounced upon those inappropriately attired has far less to do with God sending them away than it does with their own separation from the party that God wants them to attend. By taking the invitation lightly, by assuming that anything goes, by failing to recognize that God wants us to be different, they miss the real joy of this party. The appropriate attire has to do with the quality of life we are living. Do you "walk the walk" or just "talk the talk"? Are you trustworthy? Are you genuine? Are you patient? Do you care for people when they are down? Have you tried to live in peace and without violence? Do you work for justice? How are you at welcoming strangers, foreigners, immigrants, the sojourners in our land? Do you love your neighbor as you love yourself? Are you forgiving? And are you that way when no one but God sees you? Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "Some of us have rolled in here without thinking much about it. We have showed up with our spiritual shirttails hanging out, lining up at the buffet table as if no one could see the ways in which we too have refused to change—refusing to surrender our fears and resentments, refusing to share our wealth, refusing to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the old clothes we wear to the king's banquet—the clothes we prefer to the wedding robe of new life—and they are as painful to him as a bride dressed in black." In this new community, "God is looking for wedding guests who will rise to the occasion of honoring the son. We can do that in shorts and running shoes, I think, as well as we can do it in suits and high heels, because our wedding robes are not made

² Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*. © 2004 An Image Book published by Doubleday

out of denim or silk. They are made from the whole fabric of our lives, using patterns God has given us—patterns of justice, forgiveness, loving-kindness, peace. When we stitch them up and put them on we are gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous.”³

That is what God wants. God wants to throw a party for all kinds of people from all kinds of places and God wants us to enjoy that party fully, so completely, that God wants us free to live life in all its fullness. Don't be haphazard about your faith. That's what it means to be appropriately attired in the kingdom of heaven. Don't forget your party clothes.

Let us pray: Help us O God to see ourselves as you see us, and to live as you would have us live, that we might join the party as your servant people. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Wedding Dress*, in *Home By Another Way*. © 1999 A Cowley Publications Book.