

*No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service*  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 22, 2017**  
**Matthew 22:1-14**

I have been thinking about weddings of late because this coming January I will be traveling to Staten Island to preside at the wedding of the son of some friends of mine from Long Island. I have been meeting the young couple for premarital counseling and wedding planning. I'm told the guest list is between three and four hundred people – either huge, or intimate, depending on your perspective.

We have witnessed some truly extraordinary weddings in our lifetime. The one freshest in our memories is probably the 2011 wedding of Britain's Prince William and Kate Middleton. Those who watched it, and heard its price tag of \$34 million, might be tempted to think it was the most opulent wedding ever.

But it paled in comparison to the 1981 wedding of Prince William's father, Prince Charles, to Lady Diana. It cost nearly \$110 million in today's dollars, although much of that was for security. For sheer self-indulgence no one has come close to the wedding of the daughter of the world's third wealthiest man, an Indian businessman. They entertained one thousand guests in Paris for five days at a total cost of \$60 million. Festivities included an engagement party at the Palace of Versailles, the only private function ever permitted there.

But I guess if people are going to be extravagant, what better thing to go overboard on than a wedding? Weddings are uniquely special times in any culture. Weddings are special times that give us all the chance to celebrate with abandon – to let our hair down and be joyful and playful and even a little silly without apology. I'm the last one who would downplay the importance of what happens in the church. But the thing we always remember is the party.

So when Jesus says that the kingdom of God is going to be like a wedding feast, we can relate, can't we? In fact, feasts of any kind are joyful times. That's why this image appears so regularly in the Bible. And it doesn't start with Jesus. In the book of Isaiah, there is a prophecy about the fulfillment of God's promise for Israel. Isaiah said that in the fullness of time, God is going to throw a huge banquet, a wildly lavish feast. Isaiah even offers the menu: "a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine-- the best of meats and the finest of wines." (Isaiah 25:6) God will be throwing a party that we won't want to miss.

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is just like a wedding feast. Luke gives an account of this same parable,

but Luke says just that a man is giving a great feast. Matthew adds the part about it being a wedding. Which one of them has the more accurate telling is not particularly important. The kingdom of God will be a feast. But in Matthew, the suggestion of a wedding feast adds to the richness of the event. Even in the time of Jesus, what celebration was greater than a marriage feast? But Matthew is also adding an allusion of the marriage as the symbolic union of Christ with the church.

Here is the beautiful description of the end-time from the book of Revelation: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'" (Revelation 21:2-5)

But I think it would be a mistake to think that Jesus is only talking about the end of time, and what it will be like in heaven. Like most of Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom, it is an invitation to experience a different way of being in the here-and-now. Jesus is describing what things can be like if we choose to live our lives in the light of God's amazing and endless grace.

Either way you want to look at it, who would turn down an invitation to something like that? But that's the problem. In the parable today, nobody wants to come! Everyone who has been invited is just too caught up in their own little worlds. One person goes off to his fields, another to his business. But the father is determined that there will be a celebration. He sends his servants out into the city to invite anyone and everyone.

So the first lesson we can draw from today's parable is that this party that God is throwing is by invitation only. But the really good news is that God has sent everyone an invitation. You're all invited. But while there are no preconditions to God's invitation, there are "post-conditions," if you will. There is a dress code.

The parable that Jesus is telling takes a kind of odd turn when the king notices that one of the people in attendance is not dressed properly. He has failed to wear the accepted wedding garment. When I say this is odd, what I mean is that it seems a little unfair. Here the king has sent his servants out to make sure that they invite everyone they can find, presumably because the king wants them there, and the first thing the king does is kick someone out because he doesn't like how they're dressed.

Fair or not, Jesus' point is that somehow every single person invited, save one, understood that an invitation this special involved some special preparation.

Some historians say that it was customary at that time for the host to provide the guests with the appropriate robes for such an event. Other scholars say there is no evidence that that was done. But if the king had provided the robes, the man has absolutely no excuse for his behavior – for he has simply chosen not to put on the robe he was given. He has failed to show the proper respect for the event, and the king, by not being clothed properly.

But this is a parable, and I hope it is obvious to everyone that Jesus isn't really talking about the clothing the body. He is talking about clothing for our nature – our inner spirits. Everyone is invited to the party, but if we choose to come, we are expected to clothe ourselves in those things that transform and change us into worthy guests. And whether the hosts in Jesus' time used to provide robes for wedding guests or not, God, our host, gives us everything we need to be dressed appropriately for the big party.

Throughout the New Testament, clothes, and especially wedding clothes, are used as a metaphor for the righteousness of Christ. In baptism, we say that the child has “put on Christ.” You have probably noticed that it is customary for an infant to wear white for its baptism. Oftentimes, particularly for small infants, boys and girls, the infant will be wearing a simple white dress. In denominations that practice adult baptisms, the one being baptized will wear a white robe. You may have attended funerals in some churches where the casket is draped with a white cloth called a “pall.” The pall symbolically connects the promises of baptism and resurrection by once again clothing the deceased in Christ.

So, what does it mean to be “clothed” in the righteousness of Christ? This is something the Apostle Paul talks about a lot. In his letter to the church at Ephesus he says, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:22-24) Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3:12-14) That's what the wedding garments represent in today's parable. And that's what the well-dressed Christian is wearing.

But we need to understand what the wedding garment in today's parable isn't. It's not like a Halloween costume – something that effects a superficial change in us while underneath we remain exactly the same. That's not what God wants, and God isn't going to be fooled if we have on a spotless white garment over the top of the same old clothes of greed, or self-centeredness, or intolerance, or whatever else we have picked out to wear as we've gone through our lives. The old stuff has to go, if we want to be welcome at the feast.

Now, perhaps our new wedding clothes will make us feel a little funny at first. More than likely, we'll have to make some changes so they fit right. So maybe you could try something like this. Start out by bringing them into your home. Wear them around the house, with your family, and see how they feel. Then move on to wearing them to church, and then to work, maybe a few days a week at first. Then wear them wherever you go. Wear them with humility, and love, and integrity, and before long, you won't feel comfortable wearing anything else.

The kingdom of God is like someone who threw the most joyful, lavish party ever, and invited everyone. Now, there is a dress code. But don't worry. The garment you need to wear is a free gift offered through the grace of God. All you need to do is to decide to put it on. One size fits all.