

October 11, 2020 Pentecost 19A

Matthew 21:1-14

The Clothes Make the Person

Matthew 22:1-14 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. 4 "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' 5 "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. 6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. 8 "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. 9 Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' 10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 12 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. 13 "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Good morning, Church! In the Red Letter Challenge we are wrapping up a week of forgiving and moving into a week of serving. Both forgiving and serving are things that flow from our being—they flow from **who we are and who we are becoming as we spend time with Jesus.**

As we move into serving this week and then giving next week, we need to note that both our serving and our giving flow from what God has done and is doing for us. Both involving taking what God has given us—whether that is abilities, energy, time, money, compassion—and using it to bless someone else and grow the kingdom of God. There is a great verse in 1 Peter that says:

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." (1 Peter 4:10)

Our serving flows from our being. It flows from God gives us as we spend time with Him. With that in mind, let's dig into this parable today. We call this the parable of the wedding banquet, but I prefer the title, "Dress for Success."

"The clothes make the man." So goes the premise of a book entitled *Dress for Success*. Of course as politically correct people, we would have to change it to read "the clothes make the person," but the meaning remains. In our less-than-ideal society, where outward appearance is of such importance, we are forced to admit that there is some element of truth in this modern proverb. However, we also recognize that it is a superficial saying. The clothes don't really make the person. "It's what's on the inside that counts," we prefer to say. Among universal truths, we would cling much more tightly to another modern proverb: "You can't judge a book by its cover." Yet in today's reading from Matthew, one wedding guest found out the brutal truth of the saying, "The clothes make the man."

Let's look at the events of the parable. What's it all about? It's about a king who

desires to give a wedding feast on behalf of his son. A royal wedding feast. I have never been to a royal wedding feast, but I have seen what lavish extremes even simple folk can go to in planning a wedding. No doubt this royal wedding feast was quite a bash. As was the custom, the king had informed the would-be guests of the occasion many months in advance so that they would have time to prepare. As our parable opens, the time has arrived for the feast, and the king sends his servants to let all who had been invited know that the momentous occasion is at hand. For reasons unknown to us, no one wanted to come. The king's feelings were undoubtedly crushed, but he must have been overflowing with patience, for he gave his guests the benefit of the doubt and sent his servants again. He wanted to make sure that they understood just what a wing-ding this was going to be. But still no takers. Some had excuses. Others showed their outright contempt for the king by torturing and killing his servants. That was enough for the king. This time he sent out two groups. To those who had rejected his invitation, he sent his armies equipped for battle. But so that the wedding feast would continue, he sent his servants again with yet more invitations. However, this time they were to invite anyone they could find. And this time the wedding hall was filled. Due to the short notice, we can speculate that the guests came as they were. The king, as was the custom, no doubt provided them with proper royal wedding clothes from his own closets. One guest, we are told, did not have the proper wedding clothes. We can imagine that he must have looked at his own clothes, brushed off a few specks of dust and said, "No thank you, I think my own clothes will do just fine." And for that one simple fact, the once patient and compassionate king ordered him bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. End of story. And, apparently, the clothes do make the man.

But we can't stop there. We must go back to our Lord's opening words. "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to...." This story is not just about a king and a wedding feast and a guy with the wrong kind of clothes. It's about the Kingdom of Heaven. For you see, in the same way, our God and King desired a wedding feast for His Son. That is quite a feast.

As we saw last week, for years God continued to send His servants, the prophets, to urge His Chosen people, Israel, to come to His feast. Upon rejection after rejection, and desiring that the Wedding Feast continue, God sent His servants to a new group of people, the Gentiles, of which you and I are a part.

So what about these wedding clothes? Perhaps Saint Paul says it best. "For all of you who have been baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ." God has taken away our filthy rags and clothed us with the perfect righteousness of His Son. Saint John says it this way in Revelation, "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Robes of perfect righteousness. Clothes indeed

appropriate for a royal wedding feast.

As I mentioned before, we belong to the last group called in the parable. There is only one member of this group described in any detail, so if we are to find ourselves in this parable, we must begin with him. "With him? The one thrown out into the outer darkness for refusing the clothes? No way! Who among us would refuse the clothes of righteousness offered freely by Christ?"

Who would? We would. We do it every day. We do it when we make a case for ourselves before God by trying to dress ourselves in our own righteousness. You see, Christ hands out His robes of righteousness freely, based solely upon what He did on the Cross. But we set up a system of checks and balances by which we can measure whether we, or more often, others, have earned the forgiveness offered by Christ. We hold forth our regular church attendance or our generous offering or our participation on church boards and in choir as proof of our worthiness or someone else's unworthiness. "Look at me, Lord. I give more offering than they and they make a lot more money than I do." Or "Look at those people over there. They come to church on Christmas and Easter, and they call themselves Christians?" We make self-righteousness the requirement for Heaven instead of Christ's righteousness. We reject the clothes that Christ offers and pretend that ours are good enough.

That's not the only way we refuse these robes of righteousness. At times we refuse them and try to wash our own by blaming the dirt on someone else. "Yes, Lord, I did take your name in vain, but I never would have done it if that guy hadn't cut me off on the interstate. Blame him, Lord." Or we come home and mistreat our spouses and blame it on the bad day we had at the office. It's not our fault. Or we come here to church, in no frame of mind to worship and blame it on our children who wouldn't get ready on time. We think that nothing is ever our fault.

All too often we reject the robes of righteousness offered freely by our Lord. Just like the character in the parable, we look at our own clothes, brush off a few specks of lint and march right in to the feast. And in doing so, we damn ourselves. For to come before the throne of God saying anything less than "I am a poor sinner, totally in need of your forgiveness and unable to do anything pleasing to you on my own," is to say "Thanks, but no thanks, God, my own righteousness is enough." And just as with the character in the parable, the King of Kings approaches us and says, "Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes."

Friend? You know, Matthew only records three times when our Lord uses this particular word "friend." Once here in this parable to the man about to be thrown out of the wedding feast. Again in the parable of the workers in the vineyard to the worker who complained about the people who worked less than he and got paid the same amount. And finally to Judas, when he came to the Garden of Gethsemane to

betray Jesus.

It is not among very good company that we find ourselves. But worse than the company is the sentence spoken to all who reject the clothing offered by the Lord: "Bind his hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The proper sentence for all who reject the clothes of righteousness offered freely by their Lord. "Into the outer darkness." The proper sentence for us.

Into the outer darkness. *"It was now about the sixth hour and darkness came over the whole land.... Then Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'"* For our very sins of rejection and self righteousness, Jesus faced the darkness of Hell and the Cross so that the wedding feast could continue, with us as a part of it. The King of Kings took the damnation of our filthy clothes of sin so that He could wash them brilliantly white with His blood. Fitting clothes indeed for a royal Wedding Feast. The King has pronounced the judgment. "Into the outer darkness for your sins." But the Son, for whom the Wedding Feast was planned, went Himself. And, people of God, on Good Friday, the Light of the World overcame the darkness!

The Wedding Feast, planned from the dawn of time, continues for us! The invitations come in the form of a Cross, addressed in blood by the nail-scarred hands of the One whose blood was shed. The invitations are delivered to us by a messenger called baptism, which not only invites, but clothes us in Christ's perfect righteousness and hand delivers us to the Feast. And the Feast continues. The King continues to provide the best meat and the finest wine, His Body and Blood, to sustain us in righteousness and assure us that our wedding clothes are still a brilliant righteous white, because He died to make them so.

Now what is going to flow from that? Well, service flows from that. God has made us His righteous, forgiven people. That is who we are. That is our being. Now our doing flows in the form of service. And we find ourselves in a new place in the parable:

"Then he said to his servants, 'Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' 10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."

So we go. And by our loving and serving, we invite people to God's feast. Let the Wedding Feast continue, people chosen of God. Let the Wedding Feast continue, as more and more are brought in to receive their wedding clothes. Let the Wedding Feast continue as the wedding hall continues to fill for the glory of the Bridegroom, who makes the clothes, which do in fact make the person. They make the person righteous, as righteous as the One who makes the clothes. Amen.