

“THE MOMENTS WHEN ATTIRE COUNTS”

Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14

October 9, 2011

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When I first moved to Duluth as a new minister, a church member offered to hold a dinner party in my honor to introduce me to non-church members of the community she thought I should meet. I asked about the dress code. “Informal,” she told me. I showed up in well-worn brown corduroy jeans and a flannel shirt. Notice I still remember after all these years. When I arrived at the party, the men were all in jackets and ties, the women in dresses or nice slacks. The hostess greeted me at the door with a tight-lipped expression someplace between disappointment and outrage. I stammered out an apology. I didn’t understand in those days the “code” difference between informal and casual. I was mortified, and my humiliation stayed with me, a memory that still could make me cringe until years later at another dinner party in another city, I arrived appropriately dressed except that I had spilled a coke in the car all down the front of my white silk blouse. “Goodness,” that hostess said as she pulled me into the hallway. Let’s just go upstairs and take care of this!” She found me something to wear, and all was well. After that moment, looking back to the first social disaster, I realized that my hostess there also could have chosen to help me out. I had made an innocent mistake, but she had chosen to take offense rather than be a friend.

In Jesus’ day, weddings were important community events with well-understood conventions and protocols. In the days before e-mail, telephones, or even “common” mail, when a wedding was to occur, the householder—in this case the King—would send out messengers to invite the guests to the coming event—the first century equivalent of “Save the date” cards so popular now. Then the messengers would go out again when the wedding feast was ready. To decline the invitation for any but the most pressing commitment was rude in the extreme. The wedding host would spend days and weeks making sure that there was food and drink enough for everyone. Hence, if we remember it, the importance of the story in the Gospel of John of Jesus at the wedding in Cana, to run out of wine was a major breach of hospitality, a loss of face, if you will. Going back to this particular wedding, another of the conventions of weddings was the “wedding garment” which was not a particular garment in and of itself, but it was a clean garment. Remember, in Jesus’ day, there were no washing machines. Laundering clothes was a major effort, and so in most cases, it was acceptable to wear garments less than clean. But not at weddings. It was symbolic—the new life of the married couple, the newly cleaned garments of the guests. Hosts would in fact offer a supply of newly-clean garments for guests who had none of their own. In other words, there could be no misunderstanding here, no excuse for a guest to come in inappropriately dressed. Whether rich or poor, a long-time invitee or a last minute addition, the host provided all that was needed; all one had to do to have an appropriate wedding garment was put it on.

So what is this parable about? Some have said that it signifies the rejection of the Jews by God in favor of Christianity. I—and other progressive Christian theologians with me—would disagree with that interpretation. What is at issue in this story is what is necessary to be part of the community of the church.

Matthew's gospel is written at a time when there is conflict between the Jewish Christians and the growing number of gentile Christians. Some Jewish Christians (the first wedding guests) felt entitled to be part of the community of faith merely because of their Abrahamic ancestry—a theme pretty common in the Gospels. The first part of the parable is directed at them. They feel they have no need to show up at the wedding banquet, or really to extend themselves in any way. So when the messengers come out to let them know the banquet is ready, not only do they disregard the invitation, some of them also behave in ways that echo the treatment of the prophets and others who reminded the people of God of their obligations to God.

But the parable is saved from merely being a slam against the Jewish Christians and their sense of superiority by the second part. The King—God—widens the invitation—to the poor, the gentiles, the sinners, all who would come. And they filled the banquet hall. These late invitees mirror those rejected by the Jewish authorities as unworthy, but those among whom Jesus' walked and taught and ate. It is these attendees who reflect the gentile Christians, some of whom have seemingly developed their own form of entitlement. We have converted; we have come to believe in the Risen Christ. That's all that's necessary for us. And one of those invited to the King's banquet would not even extend himself to put on the appropriate garment. In other words, like the Jewish Christians whose action spoke that ancestry was enough, some gentile Christians acted as if a verbal profession of faith was enough. In both cases, the actions of those who claimed themselves Christian did not make visible, did not make real their claim in their actions.

Now I know that was a long explanation of this parable, but it is one of the gospel teachings that is way too easy to misunderstand, and it takes us of one of the core questions of our faith. What does it mean to be Christian? Throughout the New Testament and in the long history of the church since, there has been a dichotomy created between whether our affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ or our works determine the reality of our claim to be Christian. Some people would word the question like this: what does it mean to be saved? Are we saved by our faith in Jesus Christ or by our actions? You all have heard that question before? It's one of those that makes most of us squirm. If you all know anything about me and my theology by now, you know that I am a universal Salvationist. I believe that the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, whom we call the Christ, is to show us beyond doubt all that the love of God is such that we are all saved, that we are all held precious to and with God throughout eternity, whomever we are, whatever faith we do or do not profess. So then the central question of Christian faith becomes not, what is required of us to be saved, but what does it mean to be a part of the community of those who believe that in Jesus Christ, the saving boundlessness of God's love was made known, made visible, given flesh?

And to that question, I would give this answer, just as I believe today's parable gives this answer. The truth of our Christianity does not rest in the heritage out of which we have come or any statement of faith we might profess. It comes from the disciplines of our hearts, the actions in which we dress our lives. To say we are the community who know the saving love of God through Jesus Christ means nothing, absolutely nothing, unless that knowledge changes us: changes our hearts, changes our priorities, changes how we choose to shop, to dress, to give both our time and our money. It's not a question of whether faith or works is more important, but rather the truth that the greater our faith, the deeper the knowledge of God's abiding love is writ upon our hearts, the more our lives and actions will be changed by that knowledge. There are

many good people who are not Christians, whose love, whose altruism, whose commitment to the earth and earth's people comes from a different place in them—sometimes a religious place different from ours and sometimes from a secular humanitarian place, and God bless them all. But we who call ourselves Christian, the depth of our faith is organically connected to, it is only made true, made visible by the choices we make every day of our lives—choices for justice, for kindness, for compassion, and the courage to stand for the poor and vulnerable.

And so, my friends, we are all invited, we are all treasured guests at a feast of life provided by our God. Even the garments we need to wear have been in love provided for us. Our responsibility then is to put on the appropriate garments, to attire ourselves in faith: in acts of service, kindness, courage and love, and let us go into the banquet hall in joy, and celebrate the gracious love of God that extends the whole distance between earth and heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.