

Sermon for October 11, 2020

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I opened my email yesterday to find a message titled “Need a new wardrobe?” It was an advertisement for comfy clothing at decreased cost. During the pandemic many of us seem to be sporting different wardrobes. Did you know that high heel sales have dropped 70% since March? Meanwhile tennis shoe sales are increasing – even introducing tennis shoes that have a chip that records your activity level and reports it to an app on your phone. Dress pants and pencil skirts have now been replaced by joggers, classy comfy athletic wear. Yet I have to laugh because the biggest change to fashion in 2020 seems to be that pants are optional as Zoom boxes only require your top half to be dressed for the day. Maybe you have seen the latest Snickers commercial. A man and woman have a meeting with their friends scheduled. The man joins the woman wearing his nice shirt on top but only underwear on the bottom. He expects this will be ok apparel for their Zoom gathering. The scene gets awkward when the couple’s friends are physically present, seated on the porch able to see not simply his top half but all of him. “Oh I thought this was going to be Zoom gathering”, the man declares. The ad ends “Confused? Maybe you need a Snickers.”

Oh if only a Snickers would clear our confusion. Today’s gospel reading is a confusing story that includes commentary on proper apparel. This story is the third parable in the series we have been hearing the past few weeks in which Jesus is responding to the Sadducees’ challenge to his authority. In this parable the King is holding a wedding banquet for his son. Servants are sent out to call those that have been invited to come. But the invited refuse. The servants are sent again, to include details of the prepared dinner, the feast, the extravagant party that awaits. But again those invited dismiss the invite with little concern – heading to farm and business, to what appears to be more important to these individuals. The remaining invited guests abuse and kill the servants who have carried the invite to them. The angered King then sends his troops and the murderers are killed and their cities burned. The King then tells his servants that the invited were unworthy – therefore they are to go and invite everyone they can find – both good and bad. And they come – good and bad – and fill the banquet hall.

This parable is a story about the Kingdom of God. God the King has sent prophets to tell and invite the Israelites to the banquet, the kingdom come. God's people have refused to receive God's invitation. God invites again sending prophets to share the invite— showing the extravagance of God's invite, the good news of the Kingdom. But God's people appear to be too busy with farm and business, distracted by the needs of the day, to respond to the invite. Unable to make sense of the invite, the people abuse and murder those that carry the news of God's kingdom. Instead of a celebration, division and destruction follow. Then God extends the invitation again, with a wide invitation through Christ, everyone - good and bad – come...and the banquet is filled.

Already this parable convicts – Jesus is speaking to the religious and urging them to consider their understanding of the Kingdom, of God's invite, of their response. It asks: Do you refuse God's invitation? Are you open to receiving the prophet's words? Are you too busy, too distracted, to respond to the invitation? When you do not understand do you abuse and kill those that carry the word God longs for you to hear? Are you uncomfortable with God's extravagance, with the invite to good and bad?

The parable continues. After all of this inviting and refusal, inviting and violence, wider invitation and a filled banquet hall, the King is at the party with the guests. The King notices a man there who is not wearing a wedding robe. He asks the man "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man is speechless. And then in a most horrifying twist the King has this man bound and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And Jesus ends "For many are called but few are chosen."

WHAT? If the King is God and the banquet is the Kingdom of God, and God has invited all good and bad to the banquet, to be in God's presence, what are we to do with this ending? God throws a man out of the Kingdom of God into suffering because he wasn't wearing the right clothes? "Confused...Maybe you need a Snickers."

No really, this is one of those Bible stories you wish you could just page past.

Here is the wondering. What does proper apparel for the Kingdom of God look like? What does this wedding robe represent?

Is the trouble that the man did not put forth the effort to PUT ON the right stuff, to wear what is fitting for the Kingdom? The invitation is received and without any CHANGE he shows up?

This can easily lead to the idea that we should receive God's invitation to the Kingdom and then CHANGE. We should receive the invitation and then PUT ON new things, new behaviors. Maybe this is where we look to the words of Paul – we are to put on gentleness, what is honorable and just, what is pure and pleasing, what is commendable and worthy of praise. Are these the items that make up the proper wedding robe?

While I believe God hopes we respond to the invitation by wearing these things, I don't believe the lack of *these* articles are what gets the man thrown out. I think the wedding robe represents something else.

Galatians 3:27 reads:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Or Colossians 3:

⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Christ is all in all! The only apparel to wear in response to God's invitation is to wear Christ. Christ in whom you have been baptized.

In our baptismal services we say "Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, we are clothed with God's mercy and forgiveness." You have been dressed in the proper wedding robe.

Wearing Christ, wearing God's mercy and forgiveness, we come – good and bad, fit for the Kingdom only literally IN CHRIST. Look at your clothing. Rejoice because God has fitted you with the proper apparel, Christ is all and all.

Confused? Forget the Snickers...all you need is Christ. Maybe the problem is the man without the wedding robe thought he could dress himself...

This truth that we can never come dressed properly on our own, but rather must count on God to clothe us in Christ, leads us to our other readings for the day.

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Knowing that we therefore will never be thrown out of the banquet, the Kingdom of God, we must wonder... what can we do in these new clothes? What has God dressed us for? Where are we called to go dressed this way?

Psalms 23 today says that God will lead us beside still waters and guide us along right pathways. But there is also the reminder that we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death; we will be asked to sit at the banquet table in the presence of our enemies. But we are clothed for this.

As Philippians says, we will have to stand firm in the Lord, seeking to do what is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable. To think about these things; to keep on doing what we have learned and heard and seen in those who have lived in Christ. We are clothed for this.

“Need a new wardrobe?” Nope. You have been fully dressed to live into the Kingdom of God.