

Prologue:

Today we get the third of three parables Jesus speaks in front of the temple leadership in his first teachings of Holy Week. The scene we will mark three Sunday's from now on Palm Sunday was in chapter 2, as was the parable Jessica preached on last Sunday about the unfaithful servants. It, like that, is not a lesson for the disciples; it's a confrontation with corrupt and self-righteous leadership. We shouldn't expect it to be very comfortable and it isn't. Hear the parable not from the New Revised Standard, but from the Contemporary English Bible which corrects a couple of errors in translation in many scholars' views, Matthew Chapter 22, starting at verse 1. The narrator has told us the leaders know Jesus' first two parables were criticizing them, so the audience is already extra hostile, and we get this.

What to Wear?

Matthew 22:1-14 (Contemporary English Bible)

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Susan Lewis is a Presbyterian pastoral counselor in Wilmington, North Carolina. She tells a story about when she was a student in seminary. Her first pastoral care placement was not a hospital like most of us, it was a senior living community like Presbyterian Homes in Louisville, Kentucky. One day, she was asked to visit a resident she hadn't met yet named Ruth. Knocking gently on the door to her nursing care room, Susan was greeted by a gracious and upbeat woman in her late 80's who was delighted to see her. After she and Ruth had gotten to know one another for a while, the dear woman leaned forward with a gleam in her eye and posed a question... Would Susan help her prepare for a party? There was going to be a family reunion very soon and Ruth wanted to make sure that with her failing eyes she didn't choose the wrong ensemble. Susan spent quite a bit of time with Ruth that afternoon, picking out a dress and matching earrings and a necklace and shoes that would match. As they went about this joyful errand, Ruth regaled Susan with stories of family and friends and her long life.

It was one of the most joyous days of Susan's pastoral care training...When they parted it was with the promise of stories from the upcoming festivities on her next visit....

As Susan approached the room a week later, eager for a follow-up visit with the lovely Ruth about her family time....she had a particular bounce in her step...she tapped gently on the door...and was greeted by the same gracious and upbeat smile as Ruth asked her....her name...and how she came to visit...and, oh, could she help her pull together the clothes for a party she had coming up.

Susan's heart sank. There was no party...there would be no stories...and she paused, pondering how to respond...she was still early in her training, but knew that confronting Ruth about her dementia could be upsetting...she also realized that their visit would fade from Ruth's memory shortly after she would leave her that day....would she waste time helping Ruth pick out the clothes that would never be used....or move on to her next visit...

Susan chose a garment...not for Ruth, but for herself....a garment of compassion...as resplendent and invisible as the party Ruth hoped to attend...and no less important...for Susan took the time that day and more than once again....to joyfully work with Ruth to help the lovely child of God choose the special clothes she would hope to wear to see those she loved.¹

The clothes she would choose were important to Ruth...the metaphoric clothes Susan chose to wear were just as important...

This odd little parable seems to be about clothes too....wedding clothes...

As I noted a few moment ago, Parables were a way that Jesus taught the disciples...but when he said them to outsiders, they were usually a way for him to say something he couldn't say without getting in a whole lot of trouble.

¹ Susan's story (and the Carrie illustration later in this sermon, are both taken from the Well Paper of Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, "You're Invited" originally prepared for this text's appearance in the Revised Common Lectionary in October of 2011.

That's the kind of Parable we have today. Jesus is talking to some big, powerful leaders who, well, who aren't doing a very good job...just getting more powerful...living with great privilege and not helping the people they are supposed to...

The scholars tell us the first part—the part where the first wedding guests kill the king's messengers—that's likely talk about how the folks in power rejected many of the prophets who came in the years before Jesus, who, like Jesus, was calling on the rich and powerful to do the right thing.

But this second part..the wedding part...it's seems so odd, doesn't it? Throwing out a guest who isn't dressed properly? Jesus hung around with all kinds of people who weren't dressed properly and who smelled and to whom other people wouldn't give the time of day...so there's got to be something more to it than that he was poorly dressed...

Remember, this is supposed to be like a fable...a story that is really talking about something other than what it actually says...Like, say, the story of the three little pigs.

It's not really a story about 3 pigs...it's a story about how working hard is more productive for your future than just futzing around, not taking care of our homes and lives...

So, Jesus must be saying something else with this wedding clothes story...

Why do we dress up for weddings? Why do we try and wear pretty things or lovely things?

- Respect
- Love for the couple
- Appreciation for being invited

We used to think clothes were a lot more important than they are now...

I can remember a time when at 6 and 7 years old...except for summers and Vacation Bible School...going to church meant we..the kids...had to dress for church...

My Dad's regular instructions about Sunday morning...or any special time and place for us was that we were to be "dressed and ready" by x time...

There was an expectation of preparation...dressed and READY...I guess that meant ready to behave...ready to be polite and respectful...

It was the same thing when we were in Scouts...the uniform was complicated...it had rules (it still does)...and when you wore it, you felt like you were showing dedication, respect, belonging...

When I was in school, sometimes we wore those uniforms to school...and when we put on the clothes we acted differently...We wanted people to be proud of scouting, and of us...We wanted to feel good about being a part of something bigger than ourselves...

That's really what this whole wedding invitation is about for us, I think...

When we are invited to be a part of the great feast that is the Kingdom of Heaven in the world...it's a place of radical hospitality....where God invites all of us to come in off the street...not the important and the powerful....and we are invited to be a part of something special...a place of love...a place of forgiveness, a place of kindness, a really wonderful time...

When we do that what are we invited to put on?

Well, for those of us who follow Jesus, the first thing we put on is our baptisms...that's really the sign that we've accepted the invitation to the party....on behalf of our children and ultimately on our own behalf...

We also are invited to put on love...to put on grace/forgiveness...to put on compassion/selflessness....

As we meet here today, we are in the midst of the 54th anniversary of the March 21st to 25th march from Montgomery to Selma. Tuesday morning will mark the anniversary of Dr. King's famed "How Long, Not Long" speech where he famously noted "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Just before that speech was the famed photo of the marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge....to reach the site where just two weeks before, like the King's messengers issuing wedding invitations in the parable, 50 marchers were beaten and harassed by Alabama law enforcement so badly they required hospitalization.

Do you remember the pictures from the marchers crossing the bridge? When hundreds of African Americans and white people, Christians and Jews, Catholics and Protestants put on their Sunday best and went to march across a bridge to protest how the leaders were not caring for all of God's children as they should... Some carried pictures of themselves from two weeks before...their clothes bloodied by hate and fear and abuse of power....

Those clothes would be considered lovely and wonderful at God's banquet...the clothes of bravery and sacrifice and justice and hope...

Putting on our baptisms, putting on love, putting on service to others...these are signs that we appreciate the invitation...it's a sign that being made one with Jesus Christ we know we are called to live differently...

To show up for Jesus' party like we don't appreciate it...like we don't care...or just because we have to...That doesn't recognize that we are changed by being loved...by being forgiven...by being welcomed without having to earn our way in...

That's why Jesus needed those holier-than-thou types before him that day to hear the story of the rejected guests...for they were standing in his presence rejecting his invitation, or going along just to see how they could catch him in blasphemy...

For us, that surely isn't the center of the story...it's the invitation...to be bound for this feast, this new commonwealth, and to be changed by the love and grace at the center of that invitation...so that yes...what we wear matters...

Carrie knows all about this....hers is a story my dear Friend, Reverend Margaret Peery McLaughlin, told me about a young woman in her congregation...

Carrie is an only child...and her mother has worked in high end retail her whole life..so Carrie has always been dressed to the nines. She was that precious child whose socks always matched the grosgrain ribbon in which her ponytail was gathered.

When Carrie was a Sophomore in High School, she went on the trip that is the ASP trip for their congregation in Kansas City... on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Carrie packed only Lucky Brand jeans and Banana Republic tops for their trip to a small Mayan fishing village, but has never, ever made anything of what she was wearing, though many noticed. They slept in hammocks to try and stay away from the scorpions they shook out of their boots each morning..and, during the day, went to help put a new roof on a church and community center. Carrie was the sticker queen....having brought pages and pages of them for the children to adorn their dusty dresses and time worn jeans. She helped the girls put ribbons in their hair as she had worn years before, always following the dress up play with "Que bonita!", *How pretty!* that would make the little ones smile and laugh without fail.

Mostly there wasn't play though, there was work...A roof to be constructed. Once the forms and beams and cinderblocks were all in place it was time to pour the concrete roof. But there was no fancy truck...just a bucket brigade. Buckets would be lifted hand-to-hand up the scaffolding, be poured out and then the buckets would be tossed back down.

Carrie was a bucket catcher...in her Nike shoes and Banana Republic t-shirt...as Meg remembers it..."By the end of the morning, she was covered head to toe in splatters of concrete. She was clothed in it. Clothed in the

labor of building a church. Clothed in the care and connection to a community in Mexico. The little girls came by to watch and when they saw Carrie, all clothed in concrete, they smiled and said "Que bonita!"

And finally, perhaps you saw it or heard about it on Friday...morning for us, already past evening in Christchurch...one week on from the white nationalist terrorist attack...the mosques were still closed until today...so Friday prayers were outside...and an estimated 5,000 Muslims gathered in the public square near the Al Noor mosque...they came from all over the nation...1/10 of the entire muslim population of that island nation....and behind them, thousands of Christians, Jews, Bahai, Hindus and people of no faith at all....and at the front...hundreds and hundreds of women, including the New Zealand prime minister...their heads covered in hijabs....a sign of solidarity and respect...wedding clothes for a nation that is moving from mourning to a new unity...Imam Gamal Fouda, prayer leader at the Al Noor mosque, said that last Friday, he "saw hatred and rage in the eyes of a terrorist...but this Friday, from the same place, I look out," he said, "and see the love and compassion in the eyes of fellow New Zealanders and human beings from across the globe...We are unbreakable, and the world can see in us an example of love and unity."

The women gathered at Christchurch....Carrie....Dr. King and he marchers, Susan....All putting on clothes fitting for any wedding banquet of the son of the most high....

Friends, we are bound for the kingdom of the one who has laid a feast of welcome and grace...the invitation is free....but attending will change us...will move us to respond...

And the question we have to answer with our lives, our resources and our hearts.....what will we choose to wear?