

**October 12, 2008**

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So a king is throwing a wedding party for his son. Big event. This isn't just a couple of hundred people at a swanky banquet hall with the best crystal and china and an open bar. Wedding banquets in first century Palestine lasted as long as a week, with great food and drink for the hundreds and even thousands of people attending. The host would provide special wedding garments for the guests to wear so that everyone, particularly those serving the food and drink, would know who was a part of the celebration and who was not.

Huge event, big party. Yet all of the folks the king originally invited, the people he thought were his friends, refused to come. They had lots of excuses, but that's basically what it came down to. Biblical commentators have long suggested that this group of people in Jesus's story represent the Jewish people, the folks who God had wanted to invite to the banquet of the Son, but they ended up refusing the invitation. In our world today, all sorts of others are refusing the invitation to come to the banquet of the Son, and again, for all sorts of reasons. Well, fine then, says the king. But we're going to have a party anyway, so let's invite everyone!

Completely unheard of. I can't imagine a Toronto millionaire today sending servants into the streets of Toronto to invite whoever happens to be there to a huge party, can you? The guy selling hot dogs from his cart and the Bay Street trader in the fine suit. The hospital staff out in front having a smoke and the bicycle courier whizzing past. The teenagers just hanging out and the senior citizen in her scooter trying to get around them. Everyone is invited, everyone is welcome, good and bad alike, says the story.

And is that not God's invitation to us? We are all invited, all loved, all welcome to the banquet of the Son. Whether those around us think we are good, and whether those around us think we are bad, all are equally welcome. That is the good news of the gospel, that is the promise of Jesus. Whoever we are, and whatever we may have done in our lives up to now, we are all welcome to come and share the gifts of the king.

But then we get this odd bit at the end of the story. For here is a guest who is not wearing a wedding robe. It's not because he couldn't afford one, because the king provided them for everyone. He's just... not wearing it. And the king is speechless with anger, and has him cast out of the party.

Now, I believe that this upset over clothes is much more than some kind of first-century episode of "What Not to Wear."

Clothes, you see, are important symbols. The clothes I wear here in church week by week are full of symbols, the alb is white to remind us all of our baptisms, and the stole

I wear is to remind us all of taking on the yoke of Christ, the chasuble is to represent the seamless cloak of Jesus that the soldiers threw dice for while he hung on the cross. But other clothes are symbolic, too. Many people wear uniforms, whether for work or for school or as members of a club or team. When a person wears a suit and tie to a business meeting, there is a symbol there; when a person wears baggy pants and gang colours when walking through the neighbourhood, there is a symbol there, too. In every case, whether the uniform is formally mandated or simply a custom or tradition, the clothes make a statement beyond simply wanting to look nice. When a person chooses to wear these clothes, that person is saying, I belong here, I am one of this group of human beings, and even if these clothes don't flatter me or the colours aren't my favourites, I will wear them and do so gladly because being a part of this community is more important. And in all of these examples, if a person is not wearing the correct clothes, the person is making a different statement: I don't belong with this group of people. I don't believe in the things that they stand for, and I refuse to comply here.

So for Jesus telling the story, the lack of a wedding robe on this one guest is about much more than fashion, and even about much more than personal choice.

You see, this is not only a story about a wedding feast. This is a story about the kingdom of God. And yes, all are invited to come to the kingdom of God, to partake of the riches of God's grace, to revel in the generosity of our loving Creator to us. But once we accept the invitation, there are certain standards of behaviour we are expected to abide by. And if we choose not to, then we will be asked to leave.

We are none of us perfect. We know that we will all fail to live up to the high ideals we have as followers of Jesus Christ, that we will fail to love as fully as we have been loved, that we will think and say and do things which we ought not to have done, and that we will not think or say or do things which we ought to have done. All sin and fall short of the glory of God. But that's not what I'm talking about here, and that's not what Jesus was talking about.

Instead, we are talking about someone who has wilfully chosen to go their own way rather than live within the standards of behaviour that have been set out by the host of the banquet. St. Paul once wrote about an attitude of entitlement, the attitude that said that since all sin is forgiven anyway, it doesn't matter what I do and so I'll do whatever the heck I feel like doing. Shall I sin the more so that grace may abound? he asked rhetorically. By no means! he responded. How can we who have died to sin go on living in it?

Every human community has standards of behaviour, has agreed-upon norms of how we treat one another. Sometimes these are formalized, as with the pages and pages of rules found in the Rule of St. Benedict, a book that covers everything from what order

members of a monastic community receive their daily meals to how many psalms should be said each time the community gathers to pray. Sometimes the norms of a community are unwritten, as with a group of friends or family who simply get together to enjoy one another's company from time to time, rules like don't bring up politics when Uncle Bill is around because he's a Tory and the whole rest of the family are NDP supporters. Often, there is a mix of formal and informal rules: a workplace may have a dress code or a harassment policy, but not bother to mandate general courtesies such as saying please and thank you.

The church is no different. We have a set of rules that are formalized in the Canons, or bylaws, of the church. We have other rules to govern how we worship found in our authorized books of worship, the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Alternative Services.

But most of how we live together is unwritten, informal. And it is in those unwritten, informal expectations that we find ourselves getting tripped up. And so we find ourselves in a situation of many of the guests at the party saying, you're not wearing the right wedding robe. You have not complied with the rules and norms of this parish. But those other guests at the party are saying, there's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing, thank you very much.

How do we move forward from this?

It would be nice if the king would show up and tell us how to deal with this situation. It would be wonderful to have God, or absent God some other authority like the bishop, come in and tell us exactly what to do. The bishop's envoy has told us what she, after hours and hours of work, thinks ought to happen with those who have chosen not to wear the wedding robes. But this is not her parish, not her community, and we need to sort it through for ourselves.

First, from now on I think that it will be important in the life of this parish to be clearer about what our expectations are of those in our community. We will need to make absolutely clear to everyone just what are the wedding robes those at the party are asked to wear.

As to those who have already chosen not to wear the same robes worn by others? They have chosen to be at the party but in their own way. Their actions have served to say, belonging with this group of people is not as important as doing things my way, and I refuse to comply here. What are we to do?

This is where we find ourselves. This is where we find ourselves whenever someone breaches the norms of whatever community we are in, and it is never easy. Sometimes, the person can choose to say I'm sorry, and can put on the wedding robes and return to

becoming a part of the community. It's not an easy process, and it takes time to rebuild trust, but sometimes it does work. Sometimes, the violation of the expectations of the community has been so flagrant, or has gone on for so long, that the trust cannot be rebuilt, and the person is asked to leave the party. And all of us who have lived in families, with friends, in workplaces or in churches have seen both happen. We have seen the lost sheep brought back into the fold, and we have seen the wedding guest with no robes cast out of the party.

I do not propose in this sermon to announce which path this community will take. That is still emerging. What is clear from Jesus's words this morning is that no one can stay at the party without the proper wedding robes. But when we accept those robes, when we agree to strive to live by the standards Christ sets for us, that our human community has chosen to follow, we are all given the great opportunity to enjoy the incredible bounty, the gracious gifts of our God. Amen.