

Dress Code Required

Matthew 22:1-14

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Kyle Childress

We want to hear that everyone is all right exactly as they are, that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. But the argument doesn't work... Jesus' love reached people where they were, but his love refused to let them stay as they were. Love wants the best for the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed, changed.

- N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone: Part 2

My late friend Ray Vickrey, long-time pastor of the Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, used to tell a story on himself. Seems it was a Saturday afternoon and he was out front of his house mowing the grass. Screeching up in his car came his minister of music, who jumped out, waving his arms. Ray shut-off his lawnmower, as the min. of music exclaimed, "Ray! You're supposed to be doing a wedding at the church that was to start 20 minutes ago! I've been calling you but apparently you were out here mowing. Let's go. You can put your robe on at the church, and no one will know the difference." Ray, who was covered in dirt and dust and grass clippings, said, "No, I need to take a quick shower and get dressed." Sure enough, he was quick, but when all was said and done, the minister of the wedding showed up about an hour after the originally scheduled time. Ray made his apologies and proceeded with the service and everything worked out. Indeed, everyone had a good story to tell for years afterwards of the minister who was an hour late for a wedding. From Ray's perspective, he was humble and embarrassed though he learned to laugh about it later. Yet Ray knew that it was important to be appropriately dressed. Some of it was respect – for the couple, for the importance

of what was going on: uniting a couple in holy matrimony. And some of it was respect for God and the dignity of being a minister of the gospel. Ray was not going to be at a wedding in dirty clothes covered in dirt and gas clippings.

Today, we hear about a fellow who showed up at a wedding banquet inappropriately dressed. And it did not go well for him.

Our reading from Matthew 22 is the parable of the wedding banquet. Luke 14 tells the same parable, with some differences which I'll explain later. In both parables, a king gave a wedding banquet for his son and sent out invitations far and wide. Preparations were big – a giant barbeque and all the fixings, a band, tables and chairs, decorations, flowers, and all the rest. It was a big deal. A royal wedding... And no one showed up.

But the king did not give up. He tried again, this time sending out messengers to all the leading members of the community telling them this will be the finest wedding banquet anyone ever attended – the best food, the best music, the finest of everything. “So, come on! Join with others and enjoy!” But the invitees responded with “I’m too busy” or “I have to go to my office,” “Sorry, I believe in church, but I can’t let it disrupt my busy life.” According to the parable, a few even went to extreme of beating up the king’s messengers and killing them!

Wow! In the parable – and I remind you parables are often meant to shock and grab your attention – the king puts the banquet on hold, and goes to war, punishing all those who spurned the king’s invitation and mistreated or killed his servants. This is one of the places where Matthew’s version is different from Luke’s. Luke does not have the punishment and war.

Here is where historical background is important. Most New Testament scholars agree that Matthew and Matthew's community of faith were dealing with the tensions and divisions between a small Christian community and the wider context of Judaism. By the time Matthew was writing, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans and the Temple razed. So, Matthew's version of the parable reflects this division and destruction of Jerusalem.

Anyway, in the parable, the king still does not give up. Notice that the king is going to have the banquet whether we show up or not. So, the king sends out his servants again, saying, "Go out there and get everyone and anyone. Go out to the side streets and the alley ways. Go to the small towns and out in the country. Find anyone and give them an invitation." As a result, a crowd shows up, a crowd of all sorts of people.

People are coming in the door in awe of being invited to the royal wedding banquet. Their stomachs growl as they see and smell all of the food. The decorations are beautiful. The music starts. It's almost unbelievable. As the guests come in, they're thanking members of the royal household, "Thank you. Thank you, for inviting us. This is awesome. Is there something we can do to help? Wait tables? Work in the kitchen? How might we show you how grateful we are?" And the king says, "You don't have to do anything, we're just glad you're here. This is a gift. Enjoy. To help you enjoy even more, we have for wedding garments made just for you. Go right over there in that room, and they will fit you with a new suit of clothes."

It was overwhelming to be invited to the banquet. Now, they realized they were being given a second gift. They were being invited to change. They were being invited to change out of who they had been into who they could fully become as party guests of the king. Now, it was clear the king loved them for who they were: it was definitely a “come as you are” invitation. But it was also clear the king loved them too much to just let them stay the way they were. The king loved them too much to let them stay in their dirty clothes, covered in grime and hatred, with old habits and old resentments staining their shirts, old fear and old anger eating holes in their pants. Everything they had on was discolored by old despair, and new diminishment. The king was saying, “Leave your racism at the door. Don’t wear it in here. Leave your guns in the car. Leave your own custom-made suits that show how important you are. Leave your expensive gowns. Leave your prejudices. Leave your hatred and fears. Leave your suspicion. Take off all of that. Go through these waters, get a bath, and come out and put on these new clothes I’m giving you.”

They all were invited to live out their baptism by taking off those old, soiled, selfish ways of being and living, in order to put on the beautiful, wedding robe of new life and deeper, more generous discipleship. And the people who came from all over were ready. They wanted to change into the wedding robes. They wanted to put on their new baptismal garments. For as soon as they had walked in and looked around, they had realized their old lives were a bit out of place at God’s great party. Finally, here was a chance to begin again. Here was a chance to live a new life beginning now. Here were clothes of hope, and oh, my, how they yearned to put on some hope.

This is where Matthew adds something else that Luke does not. For Luke, the emphasis of the parable is on inviting everyone from the highways and the byways and he leaves it at that. Matthew's version adds that the king walks into the banquet and notices one fellow who is still wearing his old hatreds and fears. The king says, "How did you get in here without putting on new clothes?" Then he tells security, "Get this guy out of here. It's obvious he'd rather be outside so throw him out where he'll be more comfortable. He likes weeping and gnashing of teeth, where people are at each other's throats, so throw him out there." Then he adds, "For many are called, but few are chosen." Which apparently was a Jewish saying which means, "God wants everyone at the party, but not everyone wants to come or knows how to behave when they get there" (see Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 247).

It's interesting how some of us want to be at the party but we want to be there on our terms, not God's. We want to wear what we want to wear. Maybe we think we know better, or perhaps it is our pride, or our fear, or our lack of trust. Maybe we think "It's my right to wear what I want to wear; my personal liberty is at stake."

Well, God does not coerce us to the banquet. God simply extends the invitation of grace. Whether or not we will receive the invitation and take up the responsibility to live in Christ, is a question in our own hands.

The Apostle Paul says in Galatians, "As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). In Romans Paul says, "Let us cast off the

works of darkness and put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the sinful nature, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14).

Putting on Christ is risky. It means we open our lives and our hearts to becoming new, and we open ourselves to others. Instead of hatred and fear and old ways of seeing the world around us, we begin to see for real. Opening our blind eyes for the first time can be scary. Adjusting our vision to the light is difficult at first. Extending our open arms to embrace others, especially those we’ve always considered to be different, can feel precarious. And these days, we have enough precariousness to last five lifetimes.

Writer Rebecca Solnit says that we human beings are not very good at “cultivating hope when the future seems unsettled and uncertain.” She says we want the certainty “of either victory or defeat.” One way or another we can live with that. But Solnit says, “To be hopeful is to take on (put on) a different persona.” She goes on saying, it’s risky, taking on a persona of hope, since it’s “ultimately a form of trust, trust in the unknown and the possible” (Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, p. 16, 23).

Hope is something we intentionally put on. God gives it to us, but each day we wake up and have to decide, we have to take responsibility and put on hope. Furthermore, that means praying in hope and for hope and with hope. It means being with or at least talking with others and praying with others who put on hope.

Putting on hope, putting on Christ, is odd at first. It feels as if the wedding garments do not fit. But we keep on, with the help of God and of others, and we find ourselves growing into Christ.

I remember when I was ordained to the ministry 40 years ago come this December in a small, country church in Central Texas. Afterwards, even though I was ordained and an official pastor, who could be called Reverend or Pastor or Brother, most of the time I was called, simply “Kyle.” And Kyle is who I looked like and acted like and dressed like. It was not bad; it was just not Reverend or Pastor. On Sundays I wore a suit but the rest of the time, while visiting in the hospital, or in nursing homes, or going to see someone at their home, I simply wore the standard blue jeans, boots, a work shirt, and a feed store cap. I wanted to blend in, look just like everyone else. Being an ordained pastor was not comfortable for me. Most of the time, I did not even know what to do.

One day, I received a call that an elderly lady in the church was dying, her family was gathering at her house, and they would like for me to come by. I had never been in a house where someone was dying either as a pastor or just as a person. I didn't know what to do or say, but I did have enough sense to call someone who did know. I called Browning Ware, the long-time pastor of FBC Austin, whom I called frequently about pastoral things. Browning told me, “Take your Bible, and since you're going to see some elderly people, take your KJV Bible.” He said, “Look, you don't need to say much. Just be there as a loving pastor. Read Scripture, read something of their favorites, and if they don't have a favorite, read the Psalms out loud, especially the 23rd. Then pray. Pray for the dying, pray for the living, pray for God's comfort, hope and most of all, for God's presence.... Oh, and wear a suit.” Then he hung up.

I did what Browning said. And I put on a suit, which in that day and time, was what pastors wore in that rural community, especially for something serious. I

walked into that house and room, and people did not say, “Glad you could come, Kyle.” They said, “Glad you could come Pastor.” Or “Thanks for coming Brother Kyle.”

Now, these forty years later, I still mostly do not know what I’m doing, although I still have sense enough to ask for help – usually from you. But as uncomfortable as it was, at the beginning, of putting on the clothing of a minister of Christ, over time, they fit better than they used to.

Eugene Peterson used to say that being a pastor is the best life there is, if you’re called to it. After all of these years, I concur. It is the best life there is, if you’re called it.

Now, I know not everyone is called – or invited – to be a pastor. But everyone is invited to the wedding party. You’re all called. All of you. And if you’re invited, you will discover that it is the best life there is.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.