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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 23, Series A (Pentecost 19)  
Saturday, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Sermon:    **Wedding Clothes**  
Text:       **Matthew 22:1-14**

Focus: God invites *everyone* to come to the wedding feast of his Son.

Function: That they would not dishonor God or Jesus by refusing the invitation or coming to the feast without changing.

Structure: Multiple Stories

Locus: “But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’” (SC, The Sacrament of the Altar).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. It matters what you wear to a wedding. You wouldn’t just show up in blue jeans or any old thing. You would at least put on your Sunday best—or perhaps something fancier. You certainly wouldn’t wear your *pajamas*—or would you?

Actually, I did wear pajamas to my own wedding. Obviously, that’s a story that requires more explanation. On the day of my wedding, I was so nervous that, when I woke up, I hurriedly ate breakfast and got ready in order to arrive extra early at the church. And even though we had a November wedding, I dripped with sweat through the entire ceremony, wondering why they had turned up the heat so high in the church sanctuary.

It wasn’t until later that day, after our reception, when the groomsmen and I were in the bathroom changing out of tuxes, that I came to realize why I had been so hot all morning.

As I took off my tuxedo pants, one of my groomsmen exclaimed, “Chris, what are you *wearing?*”

Looking down at my legs, I saw that I wore my plaid, flannel pajamas beneath my tuxedo for the entire ceremony and reception! Apparently, in my nervousness and haste, I forgot to take

a shower and change out of my pajamas before donning my tux. No wonder I was so hot! As I said, I may be the only person I know who wore pajamas to their own wedding.

Speaking of wedding attire, everyone knows that at a wedding, out of honor for the bride, you're not supposed to wear white, since that is *her* color. Even ivory cuts it a little too close. White is a symbol of chastity and purity—a holdover from the days when brides actually *were* pure virgins on the day of their weddings (unfortunately, that's rarely the case anymore).

Traditionally, in addition to a white dress, brides are supposed to wear “something old and something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a sixpence in her shoe.” Of course, no bride would ever dare to wear black—talk about a statement! Yet in India and Pakistan, many brides wear bright colors like red, yellow, and pink to symbolize their joy.

When Lisa and I were planning our wedding, we instructed all the men in the family to wear a solid black suit—not navy, not gray, not charcoal, no pinstripes. Lisa wanted to ensure that we all matched in the family pictures and that nobody's outfits clashed.

Because my stepdad Jim has a reputation for being cheap, I told him that if he didn't have a black suit, I would buy him one so that he didn't just go for what was in reach. But when he walked into the church on that Saturday morning, what do you think he was wearing? *A white tuxedo!* That's right: a white tux! I was so angry and embarrassed (mainly for Lisa's sake). Your stepson's wedding wasn't the day to pull a stunt. But he laughed it off and told me he just wanted to see my reaction. He left the room and came back 10 minutes later wearing the proper attire. That was a good thing because Lisa told me that if he kept wearing white, he wouldn't be allowed in the pictures. If you don't wear the right clothes fit for the occasion, you get left out.

Wedding clothes are an important plot element today in Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast. After a rather dramatic and violent story, which deserves attention of its town, Jesus tell

us about a strange encounter between the King (who is the father of the groom) and a rather ill-clad wedding guest:

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt. 22:11-13, ESV).<sup>1</sup>

What on *earth* is going on here? At first hearing, the behavior of the king seems outrageous and unfair. After all, didn’t his guests arrive with only a last-minute invitation (vv. 9-10)? His servants pulled a motley crew of people in off the street wearing whatever they had on at the time. How, then, could the king quibble about what they wore? As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “With all due respect, your highness, either give them time to go home and change or lower your standards.”<sup>2</sup>

The King had a wedding hall and feast prepared. He needed to fill the tables quickly so they could eat the lamb before it got cold. “The wedding feast is ready,” said the king, “but those invited were not worthy” (v. 8). After the first list of guests refused to come and even killed some of his servants, the King sent his servants out again—this time bring back from the highways and byways anyone they could find who was willing to come (v. 9). It didn’t matter who they were or where they came from. “Both bad and good” alike were welcome, so that the wedding hall would be full (v. 10). “Come one, come all! Just come!”

This is quite generous—you might even say “*gracious*.” The king didn’t require a resumé or background check before a bunch of strangers traipsed onto his grounds. Nothing they’d done or hadn’t done disqualified them. Both good and bad were welcome. The king

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Wedding Dress,” in *Home by Another Way* (Lanham, Maryland: Cowley Books, 1996), 194.

extended his gracious invitation without any regard for anyone’s status or past. He chose them because of who he was, not because of who they were. He chose them because he wanted to make his Son happy on his wedding day. So they came.

At last, relieved and satisfied that the celebration would not go to waste, and having given his toast to the happy couple, the king went out to make the rounds and visit with his guests. He made merry as he made the rounds—that is, until he came upon a poorly dressed fellow “who had no wedding garment” (v. 11).

Why was the king so wroth at the wedding guest who got bounced for not wearing tails and a tie? Over the years, many Bible scholars have suggested that, perhaps, there was an ancient custom of the wedding host providing special wedding garments for his guests—“the same way that some fancy restaurants keep a spare jacket and tie on hand for dinner guests who show up in shirt sleeves.”<sup>3</sup> But, as Jeff Gibbs points out, this idea is all conjecture based on a guess based on a hunch. The supposed evidence is a house of cards.<sup>4</sup> In other words: it sounds nice, but it’s probably not true.

Likewise, Gibbs points out that we have no way to assert what the wedding garment *is*. Perhaps we are better off to say what it *isn’t*, or worded altogether differently, “What does it mean to *lack* a wedding garment?”<sup>5</sup>

The key to interpreting the parable is verse 8 and the king’s determination that the first batch of guests “were not worthy.” What matters at the wedding feast is whether the guests are worthy or unworthy. And “to be ‘not worthy’ (22:8) is to dishonor and reject the king and the wedding feast for his son.... To be ‘nor worthy’ (22:8) is to oppose, hate and seek to destroy

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, “Wedding Dress,” 195.

See for example: Edersheim and Barclay.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 1111.

<sup>5</sup> Gibbs, 1112.

God's Son."<sup>6</sup> The Son of God and the son of the king are one and the same: Jesus Christ, our Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

Those who prove themselves unworthy to come to the wedding come in all varieties and sorts. Of course, there are those who are just plain uninterested. They pay no attention to God's Word or his invitation to come and celebrate the Son. Nowadays people miss church for many of the very same reasons that the invited guests turned down the King's wedding invitation: they are uninterested and go away to their fields (soccer, baseball, football, crops) and their business (work). Like the thorns of distraction that choke out the Word in Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13), so also "the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" in our lives (Matt. 13:22). Boredom, worry, work, and entertainment can take us away from Church and steal our hearts away from Christ as much as despair or the devil's temptations. Here is a warning for those who became estranged from the Church.

Others react to God's gracious invitation with violence and hatred. These are those who killed the prophets and apostles, who crucified Jesus, and who persecute the Church even today. The Romans, Muslims, and Communists are just a few historical examples. (*Aside: During the covid-19 pandemic, one also wonders about governors who prevent people from attending church. Are they also unworthy?*)

And then there are those who actually come to church but don't change. Their hearts and minds are exactly the same when they leave the building as they were before they came in. God might say, "Come as you are," but he expects you to leave different. It doesn't really matter what you wear. What matters is whether or not you are clothed with Christ and the robe of his righteousness (cf. Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27). Do you honor Jesus with a repentant heart and

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<sup>6</sup> Gibbs, 1113.

renewed mind, or do you hold fast to your old ways and old attitudes—as the underdressed guest clung to his old clothes, only to find them threadbare and worthless in the end? If we come to the feast, but we don't change our hearts, we too are unworthy.

The trouble with the underdressed guest isn't that he didn't change his clothes; it's that he didn't have a change of heart—"not that he showed up in shorts [but] that he showed up short on righteousness and thought no one would notice, least of all the king."<sup>7</sup> But the King does notice. He always does. If he knows the number of hairs on your head and your thoughts even before you speak them, he certainly notices what you wear to his Son's wedding.

In a few minutes we will enjoy another feast together: the Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. We call this a "foretaste of the feast to come," meaning the marriage supper of the Lamb—the wedding feast of the King's son (Revelation 19). Jesus bids you, "Take and eat, take and drink," but to receive his welcome and invitation, we must be worthy. We need to wear the right clothes when we come to commune. I don't care if you're wearing jeans or a three-piece suit. I don't think God cares either. (*Aside:* At my previous congregation, we actually had an elder who routinely showed up in flannel pajama pants and a white T-shirt to help serve Communion). But he does care about what's in your heart and whether or not you're wearing your heart on your sleeve. Who is worthy to come to the Supper?

Martin Luther gives us the answer in his Small Catechism:

"Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe" (SC, The Sacrament of the Altar).

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, 196.

Worthiness doesn't depend on who you are or where you come from or what evil you've done or good you've failed to do in the past. All are invited to the feast, "both bad and good" (Matt. 22:10). What makes you worthy is whether or not you believe that the gift you receive is Jesus' Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins. Faith in Christ's words—that is your wedding garment. Are you "dressed"?

Holy Communion is real grace for real sinners who turn away from sin and turn to Christ who bled and died for you on the cross. That is his wedding gift to you—from bridegroom to bride. Turn from your sin and turn to him. He has prepared his dinner. "Everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast" (Matt 22:4). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.