

God's Dress Code

Matthew 22:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9

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October 15, 2017

Last week, I happened to be flipping around on the television, looking for something to play in the background while I was doing other things. All of a sudden a caption flashed and caught my eye...pastor gets sued for not performing wedding. It was one of those small claims court shows with an outlandish judge. This one was Judge Karen, I think. The story went like this:

A young couple had been attending a Lutheran church for a few months, and liked the pastor. They asked him to officiate at their wedding. But now they were suing him for ultimately refusing to do so (an hour before the ceremony) because he didn't feel that her wedding dress was appropriate. (Oh my, I thought...they had my attention.) The couple was asked to show a picture of the dress, which was short, but the pastor didn't like that it was also low cut, showing some cleavage. Not a lot, but some. The result was that he refused to conduct the ceremony that day unless she agreed to change. She didn't have another dress, so they didn't get married that day. They ended up losing the \$5000 they had spent on the wedding plus all of the inconvenience to their gathered guests and their own emotional distress.

Now, before the case was even presented, the judge reprimanded the woman for wearing a strapless dress into her courtroom. The judge made reference to the bottom of the court ticket, where it said, "dress appropriately." The judge asked the bailiff to go and find her a jacket or sweater to help her comply with the dress code. However, after the case was presented and in her ultimate judgement FOR the couple, the judge blasted the pastor, saying he had no right to demand she wear a certain kind of dress on her wedding day, especially since there was no written dress code!

You may think our Gospel lesson this morning, could have been the next case up on "Judge Karen", since it deals with a wedding banquet and people getting thrown out for not having worn the correct attire! The text is pretty outrageous, isn't it? And, I might say, few preachers may choose to preach on this text from the lectionary this morning. I admit this has been an extremely difficult sermon to write. "What is the good news here," I kept asking myself? But I feel it's important to not shy away from difficult texts if we believe the scriptures to be the living Word still relevant to us today. So, let's dive in and see what it's really about.

As always, in preparing for a sermon. I read the text early on in the week and begin to think and pray about what needs to be said in this day based on the context and intended message of the biblical writers. I spend a lot of time reading different commentaries to see what the writers of

the text meant in their day and historical context. Even scholars admit they have had a difficult time with this parable. So what does this mean? And what's the good news?

We know that Jesus used parables not as literal stories, but to make a point. Luke has a similar story, but it's much more genteel. Matthew's is brutal, to say the least. In his day, the idea of using clothing was commonly used as a symbol for the coming into the new community—the early worshipping community.

There are two schools of thought about who the intended audience was and the ultimate meaning of the text.

The first says that Matthew's community members were faithful Jews *who had responded to God's invitation to the kingdom banquet offered in honor of God's son, Jesus*. The message in the passage is pointed at the Pharisees, the religious leaders, who had no time to RSVP or ultimately respond to God's gracious invitation, and who persecuted the followers of the Good news. *So, this is not a matter of "Christians vs. Jews" -- but as one scholar puts it, "an intramural conflict within Judaism."*

In Matthew's world, an unexpected invitation to commoners on the main streets points toward the surprising ways the invitation to God's kingdom banquet is radically inclusive and is increasingly extended to and embraced by those once considered outsiders. So, we are in effect the second group who are gathered.

The second view of scholars says Matthew is talking to his new followers. Many in Matthew's infant church considered themselves as more urban, learned, and genteel than others. They had come from a large urban synagogue. They had tossed away the invitation because what accomplishments they did, or were presently doing... were clearly considered by them as more important.

This interpretation makes me a bit more uncomfortable. The folks sound a bit more like me or you. Perhaps they had schedules which were overloaded...all with good and worthy activities, but time and time again, God was squeezed out because of other opportunities. So, the invitation went to others to come....and people like us...well...

It all depends with whom you identify. Perhaps we are those who chosen, whether described as high or low by our neighbors, who simply and graciously accept forgiveness and the wondrous gift of the Spirit's invitation into the kingdom of God. Which indeed.., are we? Which do you, do I want to be?

What is at stake is the Gospel, the free invitation of grace to sit at the king's table of grace. What's at stake is of infinite, precious value. Yes, you can receive these glorious riches by grace alone, but if you cannot be moved by that same grace—if you look at what is offered and find it less interesting than other things that are occupying your heart and mind and life—then the result cannot be a simple shrug of the divine shoulders. *As one scholar puts it: Offer a person a chocolate chip cookie and have him turn it down and it's no big deal. Offer to donate a*

*kidney that he needs to have his life saved only to have him spurn also that and your eyes widen at such a thing.*

But at very least it may mean this: the party is finally God's party and everyone there is there by grace alone. You had to be clothed with grace to be there and no matter what you may think of the wedding garment of grace when it is handed to you, you either put it on or risk getting pitched out of the party. There is no other way to be at the party without wearing the attire the host assigns. Those who think they got there some other way or who think they can do without the clothing of grace everyone else is wearing will soon find out how wrong they are.

But then I thought about this...another way to think about this text, not found in traditional interpretations. When you look at this story and those around it in Matthew, Jesus talks about upending those in society and those in power. What if? What if we looked at this king (not as God) but as if he were known to be the unjust, corrupt and violent ruler he proves to be a few verses later? WHO would, in that scenario, want to attend a wedding banquet with him as host? What if their response of ignoring the invitation was one of protest? So, then other people were brought in as seat fillers, to avoid embarrassing the King, let's say. One man didn't have on the right clothes, and he was thrown out.

Given what we know about him, I can't help but believe that Jesus was, in fact, more like those who would never have been among the first invited to the wedding banquet of the king's son, but would have found himself in the second batch of invitees. Perhaps even, as this parable comes to its conclusion, maybe Jesus is the one without the wedding robe — the one who could not, and would not pretend to honor a tyrant king by putting on that wedding robe — who on behalf of all of us was thrown into the outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The call to us as people who follow Jesus is to stand up to those who wield unjust power even if it means risking one's very life. And isn't it just as likely that the kingdom of heaven is more like any one of us who refuses to bow to the powers that be when innocents suffer, than like a king who throws his power around and destroys those who would not do his will?

This week, the headlines have been filled with accounts of very brave women, and some very brave men who have exposed the long-held secret of abuse of power by Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. You may balk at my use of this example, but stay with me for a minute. Jesus always exposed long-held secrets which kept people and even whole systems sick and dysfunctional; he encouraged people to speak the truth; he also stood with those who had been disempowered in their communities and helped them find justice. I think of the woman accused of adultery who was about to be stoned by the religious leaders. Jesus diverts attention away from her and confronts them.

This morning...I'm not tying it all up for you. You get to decide where you fall, and with whom you identify. Are you part of the original invitation who had no time to respond to God's

gracious invitation? Are you one of those who has been included in the second batch of invitees (the good and the bad) and who accept the robe of grace?

Still, we have that nagging other person...the one who shows up without the right thing to wear and who then is thrown out...what about THAT person/group of people? Who does that represent?

Perhaps this story will help. Last month, the NY Times told the story of Michelle Jones. She is a mom, who served 20 years in a prison in Indiana for having killed her young son.

Her story is tragic. She got pregnant at 14 after what she called non-consensual sex with a high-school senior. Her mother responded by beating her, and she was placed in a series of group homes and foster families. As an adult she eventually had a psychological breakdown after years of abandonment and domestic violence, and inflicted similar treatment on her own son.

She confessed and was sentenced to 50 years in prison, but was released after 20 based on her good behavior and educational attainment.

The story picks up in the current day...at Ms. Jones' release and subsequent application to PhD programs. Seen as one of the top candidates for programs in history, she was recruited by top schools.

*N.Y.U. was one of several top schools that recruited her for their doctoral programs. She was also among 18 selected from more than 300 applicants to Harvard University's history program. But in a rare override of a department's authority to choose its graduate students, Harvard's top brass overturned Ms. Jones's admission after some professors raised concerns that she played down her crime in the application process. (NY Times Sept 13, 2017)*

The NY Times article entitled, *From Prison to Ph.D.: The Redemption and Rejection of Michelle Jones* tells that her acceptance was rescinded and she is currently enrolled at NYU.

In her statement to Harvard, Ms. Jones wrote of her son, Brandon: "I have made a commitment to myself and him that with the time I have left, I will live a redeemed life, one of service and value to others."

Could Michelle Jones and others like her...who have been labeled in our society by some as beyond redemption, fit into the category as one who would not have the proper attire? Some at Yale and Harvard think so...

Is anyone beyond redemption? Not if we accept the wedding robe of grace. The pure gift of grace...God's dress code.