Properly Dressed
Matthew 22:1-14

One of the most popular reality TV shows at the beginning of the 21st century was called What Not to Wear. Each episode focuses on a person, usually a woman, who is a walking fashion disaster. They were secretly nominated by their friends or family members to be invited onto the show, told what not to wear and then shown what to wear instead.

Before these individuals are invited onto the show, a videographer secretly films them while they are out on their daily routine, dressed as they usually are. The co-hosts use a mix of friendly ridicule and humor to help participants see where their clothes are undercutting their goals.

One segment of each show is when the co-hosts bring from the participant's home the contents of her closet and go through the items, pointing out the shortcoming of each garment. By that point, the participant has been told she is being given $5,000 to shop for a new wardrobe in New York City boutiques, but she can only have the money if she allows the hosts to critique, and, in most cases, throw out her existing wardrobe.

By the end of each show, the participant has several new outfits that are flattering and that improve her appearance. The person also is sent to a hairstylist and a makeup artist for finishing touches, and the result of the fashion makeover is always impressive. And by that point, the participant herself usually sees and likes the difference as well. Instead of knowing what not to wear, they now knew what to wear, and had new clothes provided for them.

We often get told what to wear. Recent home football games at Jack Trice have been White Out games or Color-It-Cardinal games. The exhibition game at Hilton on Wednesday was a Gold out for the Indiana Pacers, with Iowa State alum Tyrese Haliburton buying the student section gold-colored T-shirts so they would have the right color shirt to wear. Students going to the career fair have to dress professionally, although what that means can change depending on the industry or field you're working in. Kids are told to dress for the weather, wearing a raincoat or sweatshirt, or ignoring that and just being in shorts and sandals all year round.

When you're invited to a wedding, there's usually a note about what to wear. Most seem to be semi-formal, but some are more specific, sometimes even including what colors to wear, and which colors to avoid! Some obituaries even include advice on what to wear to a funeral, often wearing colors for the deceased's favorite sports team or bright colors to try to cheer people up during a somber occasion. Even as clothes choices get more casual, there are still rules about what to wear, and how to be properly dressed.

Today we hear Jesus' parable of a feast hosted by a king for his son's marriage. In that parable, one man showed up without a wedding robe, and thus was booted out of the celebration. He seemingly didn't know what not to wear.

Now, I want to focus on that part, but we need to talk about the earlier part of the parable too. Jesus is in Jerusalem, during what we will come to call Holy Week. The confrontations with the Pharisees and chief priests are increasing. Jesus is telling parables of judgement, parables that focus on telling these leaders how they have missed what God is doing through Jesus. How

they, like many of the religious leaders before them, have missed the point of God choosing them, calling them to be his people. Jesus reminds them of how their ancestors had refused to listen to the prophets calling them back to God, and now they were making the same mistakes. And so, these parables of judgement are often harsher than we think of Jesus being.

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 own, Jesus tells 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."

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? 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?

Why was the king so angry 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. But, this idea is all conjecture based on a guess based on a hunch. Perhaps we are better off to say what it isn't, or worded altogether differently, "What does it mean to lack a wedding garment?"

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 God's Son." 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. 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.

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.

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. Do you honor Jesus with a repentant heart and renewed mind, or do you cling on to your old ways and old attitudes—as the underdressed guest clung to his old clothes, only to find them inappropriate, 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." 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.

And so, Jesus pictures the heavenly banquet hall, filled with people invited by God to know the eternal salvation earned by His Son Jesus when He died on the cross and rose from the dead for us sinners. These are the people, repentant believers in Jesus Christ, who are in His Church and will be in His Church for eternity. And this–the Church–is the kingdom of God, which The Small Catechism tells us about when explaining the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come": "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word..."

We can't decide to follow Jesus; it's foreign to our nature to follow anyone or anything other than our sinful impulses. But, by the power of the Holy Spirit, when the Word of God comes to us in water, in bread, in wine, or in the word heard or read, God creates faith in us. Because of that, we can become part of the heavenly banquet, the Kingdom of God. This kingdom is what we're all part of when God's Word comes to us and by its power, be able to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus is my Lord."

He freely gives us the proper dress for entering into His eternal Church, His everlasting Kingdom. Do you know what that proper dress is? It's Jesus. It's Jesus alone. Jesus is the One in Whom all who believe will be dressed and fitted for everlasting life with God. Your good works or fine character won't get you into God's Kingdom. Nor will your good name or your good reputation. Only Jesus. The apostle Paul tells us to "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh…" (Romans 13:14)

Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism, explains it this way: "Therefore, let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new."

When I was growing up, we went on a lot of field trips. Whenever we went somewhere, our teachers reminded us that we were representing not just ourselves, but our group, our school, and our community. The name of our school, the name of our community, the name of our group went wherever we did, and the impressions we left would follow that name. Were we the group that caused noise complaints in the hotel, or did we leave our rooms better than we found them? What we did

represented not just us, but the names that we carried and used. Not only what we wore, but what how we acted, showed if we were properly dressed or not.

A few years ago, the Beta Sigs shared an article that reminded the fraternity brothers that they are always wearing the name of their fraternity, or as the article put it, you are always wearing your letters. The article read, in part:

> When you go to the grocery store, you represent us. If you fall asleep in class or earn a weak grade, you represent us. When you drive down the road and slow down so a pedestrian can cross the street, you represent us. When you turn 21 and hit the town, you represent us. When you become a leader of another campus organization, you represent us. When you insult someone or talk badly about another fraternity, you represent us. When you break up with someone and make decisions about how you behave during that difficult time, you represent us. When you go on Spring Break, you represent us. When you go home and sit at your mother's dining room table, you represent us. When you get a job and go to work for a company or organization, you represent us. When you commit your life to that special person, someday, you represent us. You are always wearing your letters.

As Christians, we are always wearing our letters. We are always wearing the name of Christ. They may not always be visible. You may not always have a cross around your neck, a WWJD bracelet on your wrist, a Christian t-shirt on, or a Christian bumper sticker on your car. But when people know who you are and what you believe, your actions reflect the name of Christ.

So, what are you wearing? People come to church here wearing a wide variety of clothes. Some come in full suits. Some come in a polo and khakis. Some come in jeans and a t-shirt. Last year, we even had some students come in their pajamas because a fire alarm had gone off at Friley as they were getting ready. But what's important isn't the clothes or the brand you're wearing. What's important is that you're clothed in Christ. The Son who invites all of us unworthy people to his wedding party, who takes our sinful suits of shame and clothes us in robes of righteousness. That's what you should wear. Thanks be to God for that free gift.

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