

“Wearing the Right Clothes” – a sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14.

Text: “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there was not wearing a wedding robe.” --Matthew 22:11

John Jacobs could well be described as one of those guys who wore the “gray flannel suit.” Or, at least, he thought of his wardrobe that way. He was getting pretty tired of wearing the same fare that the other men in the office wore so he decided to do something about it. He started by informing his wife, who bought most of his clothing, that it was time he started wearing something not quite so conservative. So Jane, with unbounded energy, went on a buying crusade for her husband.

It was not long before John noticed a stack of unfamiliar clothes on his side of the closet. As he pulled out a sweater from the pile, he realized that the new John had arrived! So what if he had to make a major presentation that day in front of a large group of peers? They would just have to get used to the wilder, crazier version of the loveable John they had come to know! So he put on the sweater, even though it did not fit just right and even though it was of a style he had not seen on other men, and he went to work and did his thing.

He still breaks out into a cold sweat whenever he thinks of that evening, when he walked into the living room and was greeted by his wife and daughter. You see, they knew right away what no one else had told him: that he had taken to work his wife’s sweater—the one with the rolled collar and cuffs that has that pleasingly feminine look! And that was just about the extent of John’s flirtation with the new look. John is back to the corporate uniform and appreciates the simpler dress code he knows, of conservative ties, shirts and suits!

Have you ever been dressed entirely wrong for a big event? I wonder how many of you women have purchased a fashionable outfit only to show up at an engagement with another woman having the very same dress! Or, how often have we come into a room looking casual when everyone else was formal, or being over-dressed when everyone else was casual!

All of these situations serve as a good backdrop to a story that Jesus told about a man who came to the rehearsal dinner of a wedding and who was not dressed properly for the occasion. Apparently no one told him that it was a black tie affair and he must have shown up in a turtle neck and slacks—or at least, in the biblical equivalent. To make matters worse, the father of the groom was the king and he was accustomed to getting his way. “Friend, how did you come in here without the proper wedding clothes?” he asked. The poor man was speechless and you can’t blame him for being so! It is not everyday that one enrages the king. Then, the father of the groom, the king, instructed his servants: “Bind this man, hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Ouch! That’s mighty rough treatment

for someone who was just improperly dressed! Let's think about this passage and see what Jesus is trying to teach us.

First, notice that this is a parable, not an allegory. That's an important distinction because a parable tries to make only one central point while an allegory can make a whole lot of points. For instance, if this were an allegory, then we could find all sorts of inferences and meanings in each of the characters and situations in the story. A good example has to do with the king and the man who showed up with improper clothes. If this were an allegory we would be tempted to say the king is God and the man in the wrong clothes is a sinner. We could go on then to say God must be a stickler for detail and is vindictive and when God gets ticked off he throws people into the fire of hell for the least transgression. A lot of TV evangelists teach that this is in fact the way God is but I think this flies in the face of Scripture.

There are not a small number of people, perhaps some who are here this morning, who think that whenever something bad happens to them that it is a form of God's punishment. Some people cross their fingers when they thank God for a blessing hoping the blessing will last but thinking just any time the shoe is going to fall and they are going to be punished by God for the consequences of their behavior. Others try to bargain with God because they figure deep down, God is holding something back.

Yes, there are many people who think of God like the ill-tempered king in this story but this is not an allegory, it is a parable, and it is not intended to give us a picture of God, it is intended to give us a picture about ourselves and this is what it is saying: **Many of us are not wearing the right clothes.** In other words, we may say the right things, belong to the right church, be part of a Christian family, boast of Christian parents or grandparents, support to a modest degree Christian causes, but still, we are not wearing the right clothes. And when this is pointed out to us, we stand there speechless.

At least, that is what happened to the ill-dressed man. Apparently he did not think the rules applied to him. He must have thought it was okay for him to come as he was, that is was perfectly right for him to do his own thing. He was surprised, even shocked when the father of the groom, the king, was upset with him. He didn't think it really mattered and so he stood there speechless.

This is not the only parable where that happened. In the "Parable of the Last Judgment" a person kept saying, "Lord, Lord," but Christ in the judgment seat said of him, "I never knew you." There was something superficial, something missing in the person who kept saying "Lord, Lord" but acted as if Jesus didn't really matter. It's like the story of a little boy who prayed one night during the family devotions: "Dear Jesus, I am sorry for the mess we made in the yard today...but we sure had fun doing it!"

Christianity is not just so many words, it is a way of life; not just lip-service but service before self. Christianity espouses time-honored values, discipline,

dignity, love of neighbor, love of God, love of self, concern for the poor, concern for the world in which we live, help to the helpless, friendship to the friendless, and a host of other expressions of our faith. People who do not wear the right clothes, who do not follow the program, should not be surprised if they hear the Master say to them: "Friend, why do you not have on the proper clothing?"

Also, notice that this story does not have a story-book ending. In fact, it is not a happy ending at all. Jesus did not write for Hollywood. Many of his parables and stories failed to end happily ever after. Many of his parables teach that there are consequences to disobedience and that they can be quite severe.

There was once a tough, grizzled cowhand who sauntered into the saloon and began drinking one whiskey after the next. The more he drank the more unruly he became. Then he took out his pearl-handled six-shooter and started putting holes in the ceiling and floor. Everyone was afraid to stand up to him. Finally though, the town's meek and mild-mannered store-keeper walked up to the cowboy and said, "Mister, I'll give you five minutes to get out of town." The old cowhand holstered his gun, pushed the whiskey glass out of his way and briskly walked out the door, jumped on his horse and headed south. When he was out of sight someone asked the storekeeper what he would have done had the cowboy refused to go. "Why, I would have extended the deadline," said the storekeeper.

I think a lot of Christians have a similar view of God. If we miss the deadline we just ask for an extension and it will be granted automatically. Such people do not take God's judgment very seriously. Their attitude is, "I sin, God forgives." They wallow in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." But grace is never cheap. It comes with a very high price.

This parable is a parable of the whole Christian story. In truth God examines us and finds us unfit. We do not wear the right clothes, we are clothed not in righteousness and goodness and self-control but in sin. In short, we are not prepared for the wedding feast but by faith in Jesus Christ God passes over our shabby dress and counts us as worthy. Our sins are serious business and it is only because of God's great love for us that God forgives us of our sins and dresses us in new, appropriate clothes.

There was once a little boy who started to come home late from school every day. Finally, his parents warned him that he must come home after school on time or that there would be serious consequences. But the very next day, he was later than ever. His mother met him at the door and said nothing; his father met him in the living room and said nothing. But at dinner that night, the boy looked at his plate. There was only one slice of bread and a little water. But his father's plate was full of good food. His father remained silent, waiting for the boy to take everything in and then he did a most remarkable thing. He took his own plate of meat and vegetables and put them in front of the boy and he took the boy's plate and made a meal of bread and water.

Year's later the boy, then a man, would testify: "All my life I have known what God is like by what my father did that night." He taught his son that sin is serious business and that it hurts others and that God's grace is a costly gift.

And so Jesus asks us to examine our lives and see if we are properly dressed. Do you have on the right garments? Are you clothed in the fruits of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? (Galatians 5:22) And when it is required, do you put on the powerful armor of God—a breastplate of righteousness, a belt of truth, a sword of the spirit and the other equipment that will help you endure the day of trouble? (Ephesians 6:10-20)

A woman took her 4-year-old granddaughter to the doctor's office with a fever. The doctor looked at her ears and said, "Who's in there, Donald Duck?" "No," she said, thinking the doctor a little silly. Then he looked at her nose and asked, "Who's in there, Mickey Mouse?" "No" she said, feeling a little embarrassed. Then he took out his stethoscope and listened to her heart. "Who's in there, Barney?" "No," she said, "Jesus is in my heart, Barney is on my underwear!"

It does not really matter who is on your underwear if Jesus is in your heart. And if he is in your heart, you are going to be properly clothed in the apparel of faith, hope, love and forgiveness and all the virtues of the Christian life. And you will not have to be speechless at the wedding feast, because you will be properly attired! Amen!