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10/15/17--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 22:1-14

DRESS CODE

I would prefer to discuss the Gospel of Luke's version of the Parable of the Banquet any day over Matthew's version. This parable Jesus told is found in both Matthew and Luke's gospels. But they are dramatically different. I like Luke's version a lot better. In Luke's version a person invites a whole bunch of people to a great banquet. But when the invitations are sent out, each of the guests offers some kind of excuse for not coming. The host gets upset and tells the servants to go out into the streets and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. And these social outcasts are treated to a great banquet. I bet you like this version of the parable too. It is a lovely parable about God's grace, and inclusive love, and acceptance of all people, especially those people society tends to ignore and demean.

But Matthew's version of this parable, the one we read today, Matthew's version is quite another matter. Were you listening to this crazy parable today? Matthew's version of this parable reads like an episode of *Game of Thrones*. No one escapes unscathed. A king plans a wedding banquet for his son. The guests are invited. And like in Luke's version of the story, they all make excuses for why they can't come. But then Matthew takes it a bit further. Some of the invited guests not only refuse to come, they mock the servants sent to invite them, abuse and even kill them. The king becomes enraged and sends his troops to hunt down the murderers, and then he burns the entire city. Then the king tells the servants to go out into the streets and invite everyone they find. Matthew tells us that the servants gathered into the banquet hall everyone they could find, the good and the bad.

Well that much in and of itself would be a lot for us to chew on, but then Matthew adds yet more craziness. In Matthew's version of this parable, the king comes into the banquet hall where these folks off the streets have been rounded up and the king sees that one of the guests is not wearing the proper wedding garment. And the king throws another fit of anger. He tells his attendants to take the guest and "bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew's version of this story is filled with so much violence and judgment. And all this coming from the lips of Jesus.

This story is not only uncomfortable for us, I think we all recognize that it is also absurd. On so many levels this story is absolutely ridiculous. To begin with, no one would realistically turn down the king's invitation to come to the banquet. And it would be unimaginable that the invited guests would turn around and kill the king's servants. And then we have the king's reaction. He doesn't just punish the murderers--he destroys the entire city! And then we have that final part of the parable. How could you reasonably expect a person who was just pulled in off the streets to have the appropriate garment for the banquet? This story is filled with absurdity and hyperbole and exaggerated elements. All of that is quite intentional, because it is intended to shock us out of our complacency. All that exaggeration is there to shock us into thinking about the message of this story.

Similar to Luke's version of this story, we can also find here in Matthew's account an element of grace. Grace *is* part of the message. When the original guests turn down the invitation, the king extends an invitation to ordinary folks off the streets. We are told specifically that the good and the bad were gathered into the feast. The good and the bad. God's generous love is given to everyone, the deserving and the undeserving. All of us are invited to

be part of God's kingdom, to join in God's realm of love, compassion, generosity, and justice. But then it appears that accepting the invitation is not sufficient. Just showing up isn't enough. Something is expected of us. To join God's banquet of Life, to join the Kingdom of God, we are supposed to be clothed in a particular way.

When I was very young, my mother would wear hats to church. Most of the women did. My father and brother would wear a jacket and a tie. My sisters and I would wear our nicest dresses with scratchy tights and black patent leather Mary Janes. The night before church my mother would roll our hair in those pink spongy rollers that gave us curly hair for church but doomed us to a night of sleepless discomfort. While not an official dress code, there was clearly a social dress code for going to church that most everyone respected. Today, we have a far more casual approach to how we dress for church and nearly every other social occasion. People wear pants and jeans, shorts and flip flops. I've seen this kind of a casual, "come as you are" style of dress even at funerals and the symphony. Our society is far more casual about dress codes today.

And in many ways, that is a good thing, especially for churches. "Come as you are" sends a message of inclusion to people, not only in terms of how they dress but also theologically. Isn't that the message we should be sending as a church--Come as you are. Come as you are, with all your fears, with all your doubts, with all your brokenness, with all your pain. Come as you are. For here, you will find a place of welcome. Here you will be accepted. Here you will be loved. Here you don't have to pretend to be something you're not. Come as you are. That is an important message we need to remember. The Kingdom of God invites us to come as we are.

Come as you are, but . . . That is where Matthew's version of this story takes a major turn. What we hear from Matthew's parable is: come as you are, but *don't stay as you are*. You

see, sometimes this "come as you are" attitude invites sloppiness and complacency. I'm not talking about what we wear on our bodies. I'm talking about what we wear on our hearts and souls and minds. We get comfortable with our ways of thinking, our ways of living, our attitudes, our values. We get settled in and self-satisfied.

It may be that many of our American churches have fallen into this habit. Some American churches have been guilty of proclaiming a "gospel lite" kind of message--a message that places little to no expectations on us to live and dress as disciples of Jesus Christ. We have permitted a "come as you are" attitude of the heart and soul and mind that has been the theological equivalent of hanging out in sweatpants and t-shirts.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ expects something more from us as followers of Jesus. The gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally about transformation. It's about change. It's about God's love giving you and me new life. And new life means a change of the garments in which we clothe our hearts and minds, and in which we carry out our lives. The Kingdom of God surely welcomes all of us in. But Matthew's version of this parable of the great banquet reminds us that there is a dress code in the Kingdom of God.

In this journey you and I are making as Jesus' disciples through life and through faith, in this journey, we don't get to reach into our closets and put on whatever we want, whatever suits us, whatever feels good, whatever is the passing fad. We don't get to dress ourselves in anger and bitterness at our neighbor or colleague; we don't get to choose to wear shopping mall values where we crave and seek stuff and more stuff; we don't get to clothe ourselves in selfishness, thinking of ourselves and our own pleasure; we don't get to wear apathy to other people's suffering or needs because it is inconvenient, or choose to clothe our hearts in a desire for wealth. We don't get to dress ourselves in revenge, or intolerance, or feelings of superiority. We

don't get to wear fear and find ways to play life safe. We don't get to abuse our bodies with too much food or alcohol or drugs or abuse our minds and souls with all the unhealthy habits technology can offer. We don't get to dress ourselves in unfaithfulness to our committed relationships. We don't get to dress ourselves in whatever we want because the Kingdom of God has a dress code. We are expected to wear a new garment for our life in God's kingdom. The new garment includes radical love, even for our enemies. It involves extreme generosity, that goes beyond what is expected. The garment worn in God's kingdom involves profound compassion, even for those who have only themselves to blame. The kingdom's dress code includes a commitment to justice and courage to stand up for what is right. The dress code includes forgiveness for those who have hurt us deeply.

Jesus invites us to a banquet--God's banquet of grace and love and forgiveness. It is a place that welcomes every single one of us. We all come to God's kingdom wearing our old attire: of brokenness and pain, of failures and shortcomings, of the values and priorities of this world. But God still invites us to come, to come as we are. But then having accepted the invitation to come, having decided to follow Jesus on the way, we are expected to live as changed people, no longer the same as we once were--to live as people who have accepted a new style of dressing ourselves for this world. We enter the kingdom of God as those who are willing to let Jesus give us a make-over. The kingdom's invitation is there for you and me: Come as you are, by all means. But do not stay as you are.