

Who Are You Wearing

Over the course of the Lenten season, we are puzzling over some of Jesus' more difficult parables in Matthew's gospel. In the chapter that comes before ours, Jesus has made his way into Jerusalem. Palm Sunday has already happened. His collision course with the Roman authorities and the religious authorities has reached the point of no return. His words are getting more pointed just as they are getting more attention. In the shadow of the empire, Jesus describes a decidedly different realm, God's kingdom. In this morning's text, with the religious elite listening in, Jesus tells the story of a king hosting a feast to celebrate his son's wedding. [Read Matthew 22:1-14]

Having already urged his intended guests to Save-the-Date, the invitations offered through messengers here tell the invited guests that everything is now ready. When the first messengers come their way, the invitees do the unthinkable: they ignore them. In a culture fueled by hospitality and honor, this kind of insult would have been unheard of. Astoundingly, the king offers the invitees another chance. The second invitation includes the menu and emphasizes that everything is ready. The table is set; the place cards are arranged; the wine has been poured; supper is on the table. The time is now, and there are no guests. If their first response was unthinkable, their next response is outlandish and horridly absurd. Matthew tells us, "But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them."¹ The king is beside himself with anger and responds with an extreme response of his own. These first guests are not worthy, he tells his remaining servants. One might think that the king would no longer be in a celebratory mood, but Jesus tells us that he is determined to fill every seat.

Traditionally, this parable has been explained as an allegory, meaning that each character or event in the story matched something or someone. In this allegory the Son = Jesus, the king = God the Father, the servants = the prophets, the first guests = Israel, the banquet = salvation, the joyful feast, the destroyed city =

¹ Matthew 22: 5-6, New Revised Standard Version updated edition (NRSVue)

the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70, and so on.² This allegorical reading has been wielded dangerously at times. The text has been misread and distorted as justification for anti-Semitism in small and tragically big ways. Matthew's community was caught in a struggle of how to live as Jesus' disciples in a tumultuous world at the end of the 1st century. As Dr. Kimberly Wagner writes:

Estranged from their religious, social, and cultural home among their Jewish siblings, [Matthew's community] had to figure out what it meant to exist as a community in an urban area where they had to 'carve out an identity among many competing possibilities.'² ... [The] original audience was most likely a fragile, hurting, vulnerable collection of folks trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and uncertainty.³

The community itself was conflicted about how to understand the traditions of Judaism in relationship to all that Jesus had called them to be. This parable is one example of how this conflict was playing itself out, an illustration of internal tension in an ancient community.

That's a nice and tidy explanation, isn't it? If this text simply points to a family feud a long time ago, I can give myself some comfortable breathing room, distancing myself from the violence and the drastic responses. And that sounds pretty good right now, because on the third anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic, I'd like a bit of distance from the conflict, not to mention the violence and the retribution. While we do not live under the shadow of the Roman empire, the church still feels at times like "a fragile, hurting and vulnerable collection of folks trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and uncertainty."⁴ One of you gently and playfully suggested that I climb into the pulpit this morning, hold up two puzzle pieces, suggest that we're simply stuck on this puzzle, and move on to the hymn. And yet if this parable in some way offered gospel to Matthew's community, I'm trying to trust that it can be good news for us, too.

² As pointed out by Meg Peery McGlaughlin in her paper for the Well.

³ Kimberly Wagner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/forgiveness/commentary-on-matthew-1815-35-3>

⁴ Wagner

The mention of a royal wedding likely conjures up images of William and Kate or Harry and Megan. The brides' gowns were closely guarded secrets, much like Diana's decades before. There was also a fair amount of discussion about what everyone else would be wearing as well. The scene outside Westminster Abbey and later the chapel at Windsor Castle resembled a red carpet of sorts. Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie received scathing and seemingly endless scrutiny for what they wore to one wedding. Years later there was a fascination around how American celebrities would follow—or not follow—the strict British royal dress code. And designers whose names got a mention those days saw their careers skyrocket whenever an impeccably dressed guest was asked, "Who are you wearing?"

As a proper southern woman, my mother had a fairly set idea about the dress code for when we were invited as wedding guests. Designer duds were not an essential in her mind. Appropriateness was. Depending on the time of day, men were expected to wear a suit or a tux or even tails. I was expected to wear a dress, of course, but more importantly, I was taught not to wear black (oh well)—too much of a downer or white, lest I upstage the bride. She never mentioned anything about a standard issue orange prison jumpsuit, but I'm guessing that would not have been on her list of suitable choices either.

A few years ago, Richard Mejia was a participant in a bible study led by Chris Hoke, a prison chaplain in the state of Washington.⁵ A reluctant participant at first, Richard kept coming, drawn to the stories of a rabble-rousing preacher. Hoke writes that:

[Richard] liked the stories in which Jesus walked among the kinds of characters he could relate to: thieves, prostitutes, people with problems like the untouchable sick who had to announce their presence when entering a neighborhood, old widows... madmen in graveyards cutting themselves and breaking their chains. Richard started to pay attention to this protagonist who spent much of his time among lives gathered in the cracks of towns and all around the edges, the outside, like trash. Jesus enjoyed them, it seemed. Even loved them, valued them. He touched them, restored them, and spoke

⁵ This story by Chris Hoke appeared in *The Christian Century* on January 21, 2015 and can be found here: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-01/wedding-guests-jumpsuits>. Fair warning, the language is rougher than one might ordinarily expect.

of a kingdom where they belonged, a kingdom that was both here and hidden. He talked as if God were like this as well.⁶

One Sunday afternoon, Richard gathered every inmate he could cajole or coerce into coming to bible study. Chris asked another prisoner to read this parable aloud. A few verses in, Richard decided they needed to act it out, so he jumped up from his seat and started directing other prisoners to stand here or walk over there. Richard got especially excited about the last invitation, the one where the king sends the slaves out into the streets to gather up the good and the bad—“like us!” Richard insisted. “It’s a classy kinda thing, but [people] like us can come.” He started imagining himself as one of the messengers:

[People] like us are bad. Thieves, drug addicts, crack heads, crack babies, gangsters, lawbreakers, bad people. There’s [a lot of] us out there. I mean if the king really wants his house to be full...I’ll help him find them.⁷

Richard was joyful, ecstatic even. Chris the chaplain really wanted to end the reading right there, but the reader had already continued. Chris tried to interrupt, but Richard would have none of it. He sensed that Chris was hiding something, so he insisted that they keep going:

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.⁸

Richard was crushed. This was no academic exercise, no long ago allegory. This was here and now. This was the kind of *unwelcome* he knew all too well:

‘Just what I...thought!’ [Richard yelled.] ‘What do you expect from people like us, [Chris]? We don’t have all the right clothes. We never look right! You should know that!’ Though these were Jesus’

⁶ Hoke

⁷ Hoke

⁸ Matthew 22: 11-14, NRSVue

words, and ancient, he nevertheless held [Chris] responsible. As a gang member, he knew what it meant to represent something bigger than yourself with full responsibility. ‘Why...even invite us to any of this if you’re just gonna humiliate us and throw us out anyway? It’d be better not to come than have you break our...hearts!’⁹

Chris took a breath and explained that the parable was set in a time when the host, the king would provide a wedding garment for everyone in attendance. This wasn’t a matter of wealth or poverty. A wedding garment would have been provided for everyone—the good and the bad. It wasn’t a matter of black tie or a white dress. It was and is a matter of being a good guest:

‘You’re just assuming,’ Chris said, ‘the one not wearing the garment is one of the “bad” people who were invited off the streets. But it doesn’t say that. What if it’s one of the “good” people who feels suddenly uncomfortable around all these “bad” folks pouring in from the streets and sitting next to him? Or her. Someone who’s too good to look just like the trash seated around the table? Someone who needs to set himself apart, not putting on the same robe—putting himself on the same level—as all the undeserving [bad guys]?’ Richard’s shoulders relaxed, but [Chris] was just getting started. ‘How do you think the host would feel, watching his new flood of guests that he invited from the streets to share his joy, now all feeling judged by this one guy, who’s totally killing the party?’ Chris had never thought of this before, but he was suddenly choked with fury at this faceless character in the story who was making the mixed wedding guests in his mind as suddenly unsure of themselves as the guys around the jail table before him [at that moment]. ‘He’d throw that guy outside and tie him up,’ he almost shouted at Richard, as if it were a declaration of how Chris personally would defend Richard and his place at the table if he could.¹⁰

Parables like this one cannot be neatly solved like a puzzle. They are not neat and tidy morality tales with easy answers. Parables give us glimpses of the kingdom Jesus seeks to usher in. They give us hints of

⁹ Hoke

¹⁰ Hoke

God's deepest hopes. And in these fleeting flashes, one thing is clear. God wants to fill every seat at the table; Jesus wants to fill his kingdom to overflowing. He will go to the cross to make his devotion and his welcome crystal clear.

Decades before the gospels were written down, the Apostle Paul was trying to help the church be the church that God in Christ has called her to be. To the church in Colossae, he wrote a passage that has become a favorite to be read at weddings:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.¹¹

Two thousand years later, we are still part of a "fragile, hurting and vulnerable collection of folks trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and uncertainty."¹² By God's grace, in our baptism, we are clothed in Christ. And we belong to him *always*. It does not matter whether we show up in an orange prison jumpsuit, torn jeans, or the latest from fashion week in Paris. God adores all of us; God adores the entirety of our bewildered and bewildering human family; and God intends to save every last one of us. What we wear does not change that. Having heard God's gracious invitation, having been welcomed as God's guests, we are expected to wear God's love out about in the world not only for red carpet occasions but every day. We are called to wear our hearts and our highest devotion on our sleeves, to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and Christlike love. For in the end, it is not about what we are wearing; it is about who.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹ Colossians 3: 12-14, NRSVue

¹² Wagner