

Isaiah 25:1–9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1–9, Matthew 22:1–14

No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service?

What we wear in public has changed a lot over the last century. People used to get dressed up when they went shopping, got on a train or airplane, or went on vacation.

That has all changed. We dress down, especially when we're relaxing. These days, stores in vacation areas often put signs that say *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service* on their front doors ... especially if they sell food. After all, bare feet might spread germs ...

Merchants who cater to youth often poke fun at their competitors by posting signs that read: *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem!*

And if that isn't good enough, I once heard a United Church of Christ colleague tell a gathering of pastors about a wedding she performed ... to which the groom wore his best NASCAR tee-shirt ... and, speaking of weddings ...

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a story that includes an unfortunate person who gets thrown out of a wedding party because he doesn't meet the dress code ... You know: *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service*.

Jesus' listeners would have been familiar with Isaiah's vision of God's kingdom as a feast that we just heard: "On this mountain the LORD of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are invited with the words, "Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God!"

Matthew places this parable during Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, where he takes the Temple leadership to task ... something we often see prophets doing in the Old Testament. It comes right after an acted-out parable in which Jesus curses a fig tree that hasn't produced figs as expected, and after the parable of the wicked tenants ... both aimed at the Temple leadership.

Luke also includes this parable in his Gospel, but his version doesn't have the jagged edges and violence that Matthew's has. In Luke's telling, the king ignores the snubs and gets on with the party ... but Matthew's account features a thin-skinned king who goes ballistic when people on his A-list turn him down.

Matthew's version is no cozy bedtime story ... it is meant to disturb us—to wake us up, shake us out of our complacency, and compel us to ask hard questions about ourselves and about God.

"And yet for centuries, Christians—including the very well-meaning ones I grew up with—have attempted to soften this story by flattening it into allegory.

“In this rendering, the king represents God, the son/bridegroom is Jesus, the wedding feast is the Messianic banquet, the rejected slaves are the Old Testament prophets, and the A-list guests who refuse to attend the wedding are the Jewish people of Jesus’ day. The B-listers who come in off the streets to fill the banquet hall are *us*, the Gentiles.” (Debi Thomas in Sept. 27, 2017 *Christian Century*.)

It’s a convenient interpretation: we end up feeling snug and cozy, feasting on wine and caviar while the rest of the world burns.

But there’s a catch ... the clueless guest who hasn’t even changed into his best NASCAR tee short ... who gets thrown into outer darkness.

What could wearing the right duds possibly mean?

- That we’re OK as long as we act holy?
- That we’re OK as long as we speak the right version of Christianese?
- That we’re OK as long as we don’t let our imperfect insides show?

Or maybe it asks another question:

- Does our honor count more than our hospitality?

Let’s take another look at Isaiah ... who offers a picture of God that stands in sharp contrast to the king in Jesus’ parable.

Isaiah’s God promises to remove the disgrace of his people and “wipe away the tears from all faces.”

He is “a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.”

Maybe if we allow Matthew’s version of this parable to jar us out of our comfortable misconceptions about God, then God can use us to bring genuine comfort to the world’s afflicted.

No shirt? No shoes? No Problem!

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.