

Dress Code

It was just last month that England's Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, were in the news again. These parents of two adorable children are expecting their third child.

It's been more than six years since these two were married. But it doesn't really seem that long, does it? The royal wedding was the event of the season. Everybody was talking about it. Invitations went out not only to family and friends of the couple, but to VIPs. Heads of state. TV newscasters joked with each other about how their invitations must have gotten lost in the mail.

If you wanted to watch the wedding on TV, you had to get up early because of the time difference. That morning, I was in front of the TV when the bride arrived at Westminster Abbey. Her beautiful gown had been the subject of endless anticipation and speculation. And the bridegroom was resplendent in his military uniform with a scarlet jacket and a blue sash. His female cousins topped off their outfits with fascinators: a type of

headwear most of us had never heard of. Her Majesty the Queen was regal in yellow. And each wedding guest was expected to dress in the finest attire, suitable for such a momentous occasion.

This Sunday we hear about another royal wedding in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' parable features a king who gives a great banquet for the wedding of his son. And, like the twenty-first century wedding of Prince William and Catherine, what guests wear is of critical importance. It's all about the dress code.

When many of us in this sanctuary today were children, people dressed up—not only for weddings, but for Sunday worship as well. It was what you did. For men and boys, jackets and ties were expected. For women and girls, dresses or skirt-suits were the order of the day. And often hats and white gloves, too. That's how it was at Metropolitan Memorial Methodist Church when I was a kid. I looked forward to getting home and being able to take off that frilly dress and put on my jeans and go out to play. But at church, I had to wear my Sunday best.

And even today, when candidates for ministry are scheduled to stand before the bishop and the assembled clergy of

the South Carolina Annual Conference to be examined and elected into Conference membership, they're instructed to wear their "Sunday best."

But in some local churches, there's a more relaxed attitude about Sunday morning apparel. Visitors in resort areas may call ahead to a church where they plan to worship to check on the dress code. They're usually told that they'll be more than welcome in the casual, comfortable clothes they brought with them on vacation. According to the lyrics of an old song by Martha and the Vandellas: "It doesn't matter what you wear, just as long as you are there!"

Today we hear Jesus telling a story about a king who cares very much whether guests *are there* at his son's wedding feast.

Now first-century wedding customs were quite a bit different from our own. In that day, a wedding invitation would typically be extended a long time in advance—even up to a year—so that the recipient could "save the date." Then, when the time drew near—maybe even *on the day of*—a courtesy reminder would be delivered.

But at the last minute, when the king's servants come to announce that all is in readiness, the A-list types, who received

the original invitation, ditch out of attending this wedding. Some of them blow it off with the excuse that they have to work and can't come. Others actually mistreat and even kill the messengers. Not exactly the affirmative RSVP that the king was hoping for and looking for.

Because he's throwing a party. And it won't be much of a party with no guests.

So the king sends more servants into the town's most crowded thoroughfares to invite everyone they meet. People without the cachet, the clout, or the credentials to be at the wedding banquet. People from all walks of life. The hungry and the poor. The young and the old. Male and female. Jew and Gentile. Jesus tells us that the banquet hall's filled with all kinds of people. Filled with all those who have responded to the invitation.

But when the king comes in to mingle and feast and celebrate with his guests, he spots this one guy who's not wearing a wedding garment. He is *so* not in compliance with the dress code! And the king has him thrown out on his ear.

Now before we start feeling sorry for this person who's inappropriately dressed—or thinking that maybe he's not

wearing the correct attire because he can't afford it—let me mention that in accordance with cultural tradition, the host would *provide* each guest with a wedding garment that fit loosely over his or her clothing. Each one, before entering the banquet hall, would put on a wedding robe. This man is without the proper garment because he's refused to put it on! He has elected not to wear a wedding robe.

Which, as you have already figured out, is one of Jesus' metaphors. The wedding garment is his metaphor for what you and I are called to put on in response to the invitation of God.

God's gracious invitation is extended to all. But not all will accept it. And of the ones who *do* accept it, not all will respond. Jesus tells this parable to help you and me understand that just *accepting* the invitation of grace is not enough.

But we desire God's grace. Of course we do! Not only do we want it, we stand in need of it. That need is built into our human condition. We'd like to receive forgiveness and pardon—and salvation—without any effort on our part.

God's grace is freely given. Grace is free! But grace is not cheap. It's important that we know this. Grace is costly. On a hill

outside Jerusalem, grace was particularly costly for God in Christ Jesus.

And grace is costly for you and me to receive. Because God's grace requires human response.

In his book, *Responsible Grace*, Randy Maddox reflects on the theology of John Wesley, who teaches that God's will for your life, on the way of salvation, is to respond to the poured-out grace of God. Human response to God's grace is faith. Faith that saves. If a person elects *not* to respond in faith, that decision impacts his or her ultimate destiny. There can be serious consequences to not responding in faith.

But—fortunately for us—faith isn't something we have to come up with on our own. In fact, we *can't* come up with it on our own, any more than we can earn salvation with our works and accomplishments.

Because, like the wedding garment in Jesus' parable, faith is a gift. A gift given by a generous and gracious God. My brothers and sisters, when we accept the invitation of grace and respond to it, we put on the garment of faith—faith in Jesus Christ.

In the letters of the New Testament, again and again you find this counsel to put on Christ. To be clothed in Christ like a garment.

When you put on Christ, the grace of the Spirit sanctifies, working within you, restoring in you the beautiful image of God in which you have been created. As this image is enlivened and vitalized, it's as though you're taking off raggedy, dirty old clothes, and putting on sparkling clean, finely tailored garments. It's like stepping *out* of an old lifestyle that was all about self. And stepping *into* a life that's brand new, a life that fits you perfectly. Have you ever gotten a new outfit that seems to have been made just for you—you love wearing it—and it gives you this great feeling? The feeling you get when you put on Christ is like that. Only a zillion times better. Paul describes to believers in Philippi what your life looks like after you put on Christ. Paul encourages the Philippians—and encourages us—to experience this life.

When you put on Christ, your circumstances no longer matter, because joy wells up in you. Overflows from you. Spills out of you. So full of joy in him are you that you can't *not* rejoice!

When you put on Christ, everyone can see his kindness, his tenderness in you.

When you put on Christ, you have the assurance of his closeness, his abiding presence filling all of your moments and all of your days.

When you put on Christ, you're no longer anxious, because through him, you have intimate communion with the One he calls Father. You *know* that this One hears your prayers. And you give thanks.

When you put on Christ, you are at peace, even as the chaos of this world spins around you. You don't quite understand *how* you can be at peace. But in your deepest places, at your center, you feel this peace and you know this peace, along with the awareness that its Source is the One who is with you always.

When you put on Christ, your mind fills with whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and praiseworthy. You look for the good. You focus on the goodness of everything that God has made. You embrace the goodness of God's creation.

When you put on Christ, you put on a radical new way of living. A garment of holy living. Of living in wholeness. Of committing your whole being to the One who has given you an invitation and is longing for your response.

Beloved, when in gratitude you put on Christ and have faith in his mercy, you're not only called—you are *chosen*!

So get ready. You're going to a wedding banquet. An amazing celebration! It's going to be the party to end all parties. In fact, it's going to be a party that never ends.

Are you dressed for it?

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