

Isaiah 25: 1-9
Philippians 4: 1-9
Matthew 22: 1-14

The Wrong Robe
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There is a whole genre of stories about pastors trying to give meaningful children's messages during worship. One pastor used to bring some object every week to illustrate a point about Jesus. One week, he started by holding up a stuffed squirrel and asking, "Boys and girls, do you know what this is?" There was dead silence, while the children stared at the pastor and the squirrel. The pastor asked again. Silence. Finally, one courageous little boy slowly raised his hand and said, "Gee, I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure looks like a squirrel to me."

In the same way, we sometimes read or listen to the parables, and think: "I know we're supposed to think that this is about God, or Jesus, or Heaven...but it sure looks like a mess to me." The traditional interpretation of Matthew's parable of the Wedding Feast -which begins, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a human king..." – reads the story as an allegory for God as the king, and the wedding banquet as heaven. This works well for a similar parable in the gospel of Luke, which has a feast, invitations which are refused, and new people invited – in the case of Luke's story, these are "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." This construct also works for the similar parable in the Gospel of Thomas (not found in our bibles) which begins with invitations to wealthy guests and ends with the lord saying to the servant, "Go out on the streets, and bring back whomever you find to eat my dinner;" and the explanation "Business people and merchants will not enter the realm of my Father." Sorry, all you business people and merchants out there: you may not appreciate the Gospel of Thomas.

But the parable we heard today is distinctly different. We are asked to think of a king who is hosting a wedding banquet, normally an event where invitations would be prized and sought after. But no one wants to attend...in fact they beat and kill the poor slaves who bear the message. The enraged king retaliates, killing those potential guests and burning their city (presumably his own city!) to the ground. Then he sends more slaves into the streets – which must be rubble – to invite anyone left standing, good or bad. I am thinking that these people do not have much of a wardrobe left, after the desolation rained down on this place. And they might not be in much of a party mood. The king comes into the feast, notices a man not wearing a wedding robe. When the man is asked about it – no reply. So the king has the man with the wrong robe tied up, and thrown into outer darkness. I know we are supposed to say this is heaven, but it look awful to me.

We can interpret this parable in terms of a violent God. This would reinforce what many people already think. Or we can imagine that it is meant to challenge those ways of thinking, as a comparison. For instance, I could start a parable by saying to you, "The kingdom of heaven can be compared to an army, a religious army, that rages across the desert, destroying villages and beheading civilians." Your minds would instantly go to Syria, and of course you would think of the brutal armies there, and you would think that the parable is to **contrast** a religious vision of violence with a religious vision of peace. This is because the parable would address a specific historical situation and a common social history of experience. In the same way, the first hearers of this parable would hear "human king" and think of Herod or the Roman Emperor. Especially when

they got to the burned city part. The reluctant guests might be the people of Judah, who were not thrilled to collaborate or celebrate with these overlords. They might even use violence to resist them. Eventually, all people left standing, the good and the bad, are compelled to cooperate. The domination is complete. Except for that one man, the one with the wrong robe. He stands silently in front of his accusers – not violent, but suffering on behalf of all those who unable to stand up to tyrants themselves. Remind you of anyone? See, eventually this parable does lead us to Jesus.

I realize that this flips this parable completely on its head. It means that the lack of a wedding robe is not a sign of disrespect to God, or a failing in piety or purity. It is an intentional stance of resistance to overwhelming force. As such, it points us towards resistance as well. Maybe more of us should be showing up, wearing the wrong robe.

I want to share a couple of stories – things that are actually in the news, not parables – that illustrate the possibilities of showing up wearing the “wrong robe.”

Last January, in a school in Iran, a boy developed a condition that made his hair fall out: he went completely bald. His teacher, Ali Mohammadian, noticed that he was being bullied, and decided that a gesture of solidarity was needed. He shaved his own head. No only did the bullying stop, but all the boys in his class insisted that they wanted to shave their heads too. Mr. Mohammadian told them to wait until the cold winter weather was over, but they would not wait. The whole class went bald. "I'm so happy that this has touched many hearts and people reacted enormously positive," the teacher told the press. "Everyone in the school now wants to shave their head." Funds were raised to help with medical treatment for the formerly bullied boy. This is a story in contrast with so many of our preconceptions about Iran, Muslims, and the power of bullies. The “wrong robe,” the bald head, was powerful.

Another story: in a high school in Nova Scotia, in 2007 a 9th grade boy showed up for his first day in high school wearing a pink polo shirt. He was harassed, bullied, taunted. Horrible slurs against homosexuals were used and he was threatened with a beating. Two 12th grade students heard and saw this and intervened. After school that day, they went to discount store and bought all the pink shirts they could. That night they emailed their classmates with a strategy. The next morning when that 9th grade boy arrived at school he was greeted by hundreds of students wearing pink. Some students were wearing pink shirts, other were wearing pink everything. They did not allow that one child to be thrown into outer darkness. They started a movement, the International Day of Pink. We might call it The International Day of the Wrong Robe.

No violence. No burning cities. In fact, these things may sometimes be done in silence, just as that man stood in silent resistance to the brutal king. The early Christians, the people of Mathew's Gospel and Paul's communities, knew that they could not resist that violence of their rulers and their surroundings with more violence. They needed a different tool, a stronger weapon. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Philippians. This is no parable: Paul speaks plainly to particular people in a particular place. He encourages them to “stand firm in the Lord,” to overcome small disagreements, to work together for the greater good. He tells them that faith will be nurtured and shaped by living in affirmation of the blessings of God. “Rejoice in the Lord,” he insists. Joy, gentleness, praise, gratitude will lead us to the peace of God, which passes the comprehension or understanding of those who jockey for power by more violent or domineering means.

This may or may not come naturally to us. Paul reminds us that we have to consciously call certain things to mind, in resistance to our culture's use of fear and scarcity and polarization and negative thinking. Yes, danger and limitation and scarcity are out there, but we do not have to be spiritually stunted by them. We can choose a different way.

We can think about whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable: excellent things, things worthy of praise. In doing so – let's admit it – we stand in resistance to a culture of negativity. We stand in resistance to a culture of "not enough." We stand in resistance to any culture that excludes gay teenagers or bald children. We celebrate those very young people. We look like we are wearing the wrong robes.

It starts with gratitude and gentleness. "The Lord is near," says Paul. We stop a moment, and breathe. The Lord is near. Therefore, rejoice. Therefore, be grateful. Therefore, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Therefore, that brutal king cannot compel me to dress the way he wants. Therefore, we stand with that silent man, who allowed himself to be bound, hand and foot, rather than use violence. Therefore, we belong to a great company that stands together: grateful, gentle, strong, peaceful, hopeful. We all have something in common. Because of the words and life of that man, we are all wearing the wrong robe. Amen.