My daughters were wearing Fourth of July dresses when we arrived for the wedding. Brenton and I had everything in hand. The flower girl dresses were in a hanging bag; the white tights and Mary Janes were in the basket with the barrettes. We had always planned to change the girls at the church. But the families of the bride and groom didn’t know that. So, when our girls showed up in red, cotton sundresses covered with blue and white popsicles, the rest of the wedding party looked surprised. Bewildered. Maybe a little nervous. Are you really going to send your daughters down the aisle in those?

Their confusion didn’t last long. We whisked the girls off to the bathroom to change their clothes. And, when we emerged a few minutes later, the rest of the wedding party were noticeably relieved. The frilly white frocks with blue and yellow flowers were much more suitable to the occasion. Now, Iona and Eliza looked like flower girls; they were dressed for a party. And party they did! Let me tell you: nothing twirls like a frilly flower girl dress. So, when the reception started, the girls were ready to dance.

When it comes to weddings, we all know what not to wear. This doesn’t mean we know what to wear ... I expect many of us have Googled the terms we find on wedding invitations: Black-tie optional. Cocktail attire. I even have a friend who decided the dress code for her wedding would be “snappy casual.” Many of us know well the angst of finding the perfect outfit for a wedding.

But we all know you don’t show up at a wedding in your gym clothes. Or gardening overalls. Or, even, your popsicle-covered Fourth of July dresses. A wedding is a special occasion. And it requires special attire — clothes that reveal the guests understand the significance of the moment; clothes befitting a celebration.

Apparently, there were similar standards in the ancient Mediterranean world. I imagine guests who came to a wedding feast without the proper attire would have been looked upon with surprise. Bewilderment. Perhaps, disdain.
Even so, the reaction of the king to the man who showed up without a wedding robe seems a bit harsh. Actually, the actions of the king throughout the parable seem a bit harsh. It’s the kind of story that leaves us wondering if the word “Gospel” actually means “good news.”

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son,* Jesus begins. At first, the story makes sense. Of course the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet! It is an image reminiscent of the feast Isaiah promises, when all people will gather to enjoy rich food and well-aged wines. On this day, God will swallow up death forever and wipe away every tear. Yes, this must be what the kingdom of heaven looks like!

But, as the story unfolds, we realize the scene is not quite so idyllic. For some reason the guests refuse to come to the feast. So the king sends his servants to talk up the party: *Look! Everything is ready! We’ve slaughtered the fatted calves. You don’t want to miss the event of the year!* But, it seems the guests have more important things to do. They choose plowing the fields over feasting at a royal wedding. And that’s not the worst of it. It’s not enough to reject the king’s invitation; they kill the messengers as well.

As one might expect, the king is royally ticked-off. But his response takes an already perplexing story into the realm of the absurd. The king sends his troops to destroy the murderers and to burn the city. But, he does not cancel the party. Even as the city smolders, he sends out servants to summon everyone left on the ash heap and bring them into the wedding hall.

If your head is spinning, it only means you’ve been paying attention. This parable is filled with torturous plot twists that leave us feeling dazed and confused. That’s partially because we’re so far removed from the events Matthew references. Many scholars will tell you this parable is an allegory of salvation history: Just as the king sent out servant after servant to summon guests to the feast, God sent prophet after prophet to call people to love God and neighbor and, thus, to enjoy the faithful and flourishing community God intends. Yet, time and again, the people rejected God’s messengers. And, then, in the first century, Israel saw its holy city destroyed, when Rome burned Jerusalem to the ground. This traumatic event would have been fresh in the minds of Matthew’s first audience.

Suddenly this story makes a bit more sense. Though decoding the details doesn’t make it any less troubling … especially given interpretations that suggest the guests who rejected the king’s invitation are Jews, and that those who were gathered in off the ash heap are Christians. It is important to correct this misreading any time we read this parable. It is especially important to do so today — one week after the world witnessed the tragic and horrific consequences of profound antisemitism. Matthew is not stoking conflict between Jews and Christians. Rather, the Gospel-writer is alluding to a divide within Judaism between those who responded to Jesus’ summons to follow … and those who didn’t. It’s helpful to remember the context in which this parable is told. The day after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is standing in the temple debating the chief priests. These are the people he’s sparred with throughout the Gospel because they’ve chosen power and privilege over their sacred duty to shepherd the flock.
Of course, this is not just a cautionary tale about the perils of rejecting a royal invitation. Let us not forget what happened to the poor sap who came to the feast but refused to wear a wedding robe. His unceremonious attire earned him an unceremonious exit; he was thrown out the door and into the outer darkness. In this parable, hyperbole reigns. Once again, we are left scratching our heads, wondering how this scene could teach us anything about the kingdom of God.

And, so, we pause. And we remember: This is a parable. It is not intended to be taken literally. Even reading it allegorically has its limitations. Because it flattens characters, leaving us with caricatures that only vaguely resemble the divine and human beings we come to know throughout the witness of Scripture. In this case, the king bears little resemblance to the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ — the one who asserts “blessed are the peacemakers” and calls us to forgive a brother or sister 77 times; the one who dines with tax collectors and sinners and commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Why on earth would this God banish a wedding guest to the outer darkness because he didn’t don the right robe?! Comparing this God to a reactive and violent king can leave us feeling disoriented and perplexed. But sitting with the confusion can also be clarifying. It can clarify the questions we should ask. And this is the question today’s parable evokes: What is the faithful response to God’s generous invitation?

The faithful response is not rejection. The first part of the story makes it clear that we’re expected to enter the banquet hall and enjoy the abundant feast God has prepared. But showing up is not enough. Grabbing a slice of cake and hanging out by the punch bowl is not enough. Something is required of us. A faithful response to God’s generous invitation requires wearing the proper clothing. This doesn’t mean conforming to dress codes of “black-tie optional” or “cocktail attire.” To borrow language from the Apostle Paul, it means clothing ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12). It means donning attributes that are suitable to the occasion, that are befitting the Christian life.

The church has long embraced the symbolic power of clothing, seeing the robes we wear as outward signs of an inward transformation.

In his book Leading through the Water, Professor Paul Galbreath, talks about baptism in the “good old days.”1 By “good old days” he means the third and fourth centuries, when Christianity was a young religion. Back then, if you showed interest in following the way of Jesus, you underwent a preliminary examination called a “scrutiny.” The test consisted of one question: Are you willing to help those in need? If you answered, “yes,” you went through a period of preparation for baptism. The main purpose of this training was to work on caring for your neighbors — not just the people who lived nearby or others in your circle of care. Neighbors included widows and orphans, prisoners and strangers from other countries. Concern for these siblings was so central to religious practice that Christians became known as the ones who took food and clothing to those whom society ignored. And preparing for baptism into the Christian faith involved devoting yourself to these oft-neglected neighbors.

---

When you had made enough progress on this journey, you came before the congregation. At which point, a more seasoned disciple would testify on your behalf: “I’ve been watching Rachel. I’ve been watching John. I’ve noticed that they care for the sick and the poor; I’ve seen signs of growth in their lives.” At this point, you were ready for the final step — a crash course during the season of Lent. You learned things like the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed. And, then, during the vigil on the Eve of Easter, you were brought to the font and baptized in the name of the Triune God. After you emerged from the water, the community wrapped you in new, white clothes — a baptismal gown — a garment to signify your new life in Christ, a robe to signify your faithful response to God’s generous invitation.

The baptismal gown is not so different from the wedding robe in today’s parable. Both are outward signs of inward transformation. They signal to others that you are receiving God’s gift of grace, and responding with gratitude and wonder and joy. This is what a faithful response looks like. It’s not about the clothes. It’s never been about the clothes. A faithful response is about whether or not God’s call has made a discernible difference in who you are and how you live.

Pastor and Professor Joy Jay Moore tells a story about witnessing this kind of transformation. A man in one of the congregations she served came to her early in her pastorate. “I just want you to know that I’m never going to be one of those hand-raising, knee-praying, Bible-toting, Scripture-quoting Christians,” he said. But he started to ask Joy about what she believed and why she believed it. For months they had thought-provoking conversations, but these didn’t appear to make much of a difference in this man’s life. But, one day, he decided to stop reading the books Joy had been giving him and to start reading the Bible instead. And, as Joy put it, he literally changed. His family noticed. His co-workers noticed. The only person who didn’t notice the change was the man who’d been transformed. It took someone at work calling him a Christian for him to realize he’d become a different person. His response to God’s Word had made a discernible difference in who he was and how he lived. And others could see that he’d been clothed in grace.

What is the faithful response to God’s generous invitation? This will look different for each of us. In the end, we are called to put on our own wedding robes. And yours will not be the same as mine. But there are common threads that make the clothes we wear befitting of the Christian life.

A faithful response means clothing ourselves with compassion and kindness and patience. It means being peacemakers, especially in a world where violence begets violence, leaving communities traumatized and so many innocent lives lost. It means offering grace, especially in a nation where we’re quicker to cut ties than to work toward mutual understanding. It means extending Christ’s welcome to all people — sinner and saint, rich and poor. It means doing the hard but important work of loving all our neighbors as ourselves ...

And it means delighting in God’s abundant grace and lavish love. This, after all, is at the heart of God’s invitation. It’s easy to lose sight of it in this perplexing parable, but the good news is there: God summons us to a joyful feast. Again and again, God calls us — beckoning us into the wedding hall.

---

There is a table spread; it’s overflowing with rich food and well-aged wines. The guests, who have come from all over, are laughing and dancing together. This is a banquet of love and mercy. And, like little girls dressed in frilly flower girl dresses, we are expected to come ready to party, to join in the dance, and to delight in God’s generosity and grace.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, we struggle to find words amid the horrific violence occurring in Israel and in Gaza. We cannot imagine the suffering of the Jewish and Palestinian communities. So many lives lost, so many children killed, so many scarred for life. Darkness shrouds the land that can no longer claim the name Holy.

At a moment such as this, perhaps only cries of anguish will do. Words of comfort sound feeble at best and empty at worst. Tears of grief and words of lament may be the only adequate expressions when people are determined to annihilate each other.

Yet, God, we are also compelled to condemn the violence. We are appalled at the Hamas rocket attacks on Israel, and the sea and land attacks by Hamas militants on civilians. We abhor the killing and maiming of innocent Israeli and foreign citizens. We pray that the Hamas militants will cease all hostile actions against Israel and its citizens, and release all hostages they have taken.

And, God, we also condemn the Israeli military for repeatedly attacking civilian targets in Gaza that kill and injure innocent Palestinian civilians, the majority of whom are Christians and Muslims who have nothing to do with the militants.

Gracious God, we plead for the many innocent Israeli and Palestinians who are caught up in this brutal conflict. We pray for first responders, medical personnel, and those working with organizations helping the victims of the atrocities. May they have strength and courage to carry out their life-saving work in the midst of the barbarity.

God of Love and Justice, when will we learn? When will we learn that killing is not the answer? When will we learn that violence begets more violence? Cutting off water, electricity, food, and medicine is not the answer. Oppression breeds retaliation. The never-ending cycle of revenge insures that justice and peace will always be allusive. You have given us freedom to enrich our lives, but too often we use our freedom to harm rather than heal.

God, we are tempted to turn our heads or to give in to despair. But we know you are with us even in the darkest valley, and you beckon us to seek the light no matter how faint. So we pray that the global community will seriously engage in finding a solution to the decades-long conflict so that Israelis and Palestinians will abide by international laws – and stop killing each other. Amen.