

Sermon for Pentecost 17—Year A 2011
What Should I Wear?

How many of you remembered that
there was a dress code for those
who were invited to the King's Son's Wedding?
I think many of us forget or overlook
those final lines of Matthew's version
of this parable where the
king comes in to "see the guests"
and notices a lone man who is not attired
in the expected (required?) dress code—a wedding robe.
The King inquires about his lack of proper attire—
"Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"
The guest is speechless—at a complete loss for words.
And the king throws him out—into outer darkness where there will be weeping and
gnashing of teeth.

What are we to make of all this?
On the one hand, when the A-list guests refuse the invitation to attend the prince's
wedding,
the king sends his slaves
out to gather the D-list guests—
"the good and the bad"
so that the wedding hall will be filled with guests.
On the other hand, one among "the good and bad"
who actually show up in response to the
wedding invitation gets kicked out because
the dress code has been violated.
What's up with that?
This parable always puts me in mind of the famous
—or infamous—"black and white balls" of
the late novelist, Truman Capote.
In 1966, riding high on the success of his
novels "Breakfast at Tiffany's" and "In Cold Blood,"
the eccentric author Truman Capote
held the event of the decade—
a "white and black ball" to which
he invited a large number of "A-list" celebrity guests
while imposing a dress code in which all the guests
were required to wear white and/or black clothing
--oh yes, and also masks—

Cecil Beaton, the most renowned photographer in the world at that time was completely “put off” by the host’s requirements—he is reported to have said—
“What is Capote trying to prove?”

He accused his friend of unbridled social pretension and ambition.

The press, not unexpectedly, made a fuss over the celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Mia Farrow,

but those who were little known . . . well, they were definitely among the “unchosen.”

As you might imagine, there were some party crashers.

One pleasant, well-dressed couple was caught and politely turned away.

However, a not-so-well-dressed woman managed to make it in and spoke to Capote.

"I'm sorry... I just wanted so much to see what it would be like," she explained.

Truman softened at her words and invited her to enjoy a glass of champagne, at which point she became surly. "Spending all this money," she criticized,

"when there are people all over the world starving to death. "

He called over a security guard and instructed him to ask the interloper to dance and then to waltz her out of the room—presumably into the darkness of the night where she could weep and gnash her teeth.

Nearly 5 decades later, in homage to Capote, the Rap artist P. Diddy (or “Puff Daddy)—

Sean Combs—instituted an annual Summer party known as “the white ball”—

Another party where the guests must observe a strict dress code of wearing only white clothes.

Each year, many anticipate receiving an invitation from the host who has been quoted as saying—

“Maybe you’ll be invited but maybe you won’t.”

The dress code for P Diddy’s white ball is so strict that even high profile celebrities like J.Lo have not been admitted because they did not honor the dress code.

Again, I think it is safe presume that weeping and gnashing of teeth were involved.

So, you’re asking, Pastor Susan, are you suggesting that God is a capricious and self-serving host like

Truman Capote and P Diddy?

By no means!

But . . . I am suggesting that this parable asks us

to wrestle with the nature of the party
the king gives to celebrate his son's wedding,
the rejection of the invitation to a banquet
by those who thought they had more pressing things to do,
and the fact that everyone is invited
and *nobody is kicked out who wasn't already in*,
making grace sovereign over all.

This parable seems to want to disorient us and
causes us to swing between extremes of
gracious invitation and assurance and
judgment and punishment for disrespect and
taking too lightly the life-and-death
implications of the king's invitation.
We flinch at the judgments of the king—
and, it seems, Jesus intends for us to flinch.
And yet, the final invitation is extravagant
and inclusive in the extreme--
Here is the Jesus we know who welcomes
and eats with sinners and outcasts.
Then, the inclusiveness and graciousness seems to come to an abrupt halt when the king
encounters the
guest who is not dressed appropriately.
It seems so unfair that this poor man
be punished for not having the proper garment.

Though his actions are harsh,
they are not completely unjustified,
when understood in the first century context.

It was the custom in Ancient Near Eastern weddings,
that the guests would wear a garment
that symbolized their respect for the host and the occasion. Often the host would provide
a rack of such garments
at the entryway for guests who had brought theirs.
Not to be wearing a wedding garment,
when one could have chosen one on the way in,
was a sign of disrespect for both host and occasion.

At the heart of this parable is the warning against
taking too lightly our call and acceptance by God.
God's call and invitation to for everyone—
The A-list snobs and the D-list ragamuffins.
Everybody starts out by being "in" by virtue of the invitation—nobody is excluded.

This parable asks us to consider the ways

in which we refuse the invitation from God
in one way or another.
Like the parable of the “yes” and “no” brothers,
it challenges us to embody our faith.
It warns us against being people who want peace on earth and yet are not willing to work
toward that end.
Discipleship only begins with the invitation.
It cannot remain a mere idea;
God’s invitation needs to become real through a transformed life.
Those who have been called and chosen—who have put on life in Christ—will live by
bearing with one another
and forgiving one another—
Grace is freely given and we in such grace we have been set free.
But we are not to take that grace for granted or lightly.
It is given so that we might live in grateful response to God’s claim upon us.
When we fail to clothe ourselves with compassion,
Kindness, humility, meekness and patience,
we reject God’s claim on our lives
and we live in hellish pride
which means that we are found clothed
with ourselves rather than with Christ.

The invitation is given—
Come to the banquet!
We are saved only by our acceptance of a party already in progress and God has paid for
this party
in the costly grace of Jesus’ life and death.
God’s grace calls us and faith accepts the invitation.
Outside of this banquet of love and grace,
there is no life at all.

Come, for all is now ready!