

Sermon Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Many of you have had this experience. I think we've been together long enough that I can share with you a personal, embarrassing story. Sometimes your friends have these other friends, and they think that you'd get along in a social situation, so they fix you up. Now, this is when I was single. It's funny how wrong your friends can be! I will never forget my one and only cotillion at Converse College. First, we went to the Piedmont Club to eat as a group. During dinner, I began to take off my jacket, and then, bam, out of nowhere, a maitre de shows up, and whispered in my ear, "At the Piedmont Club, gentlemen wear their jackets while dining." Strike one! At Converse, making small talk, I had just finished telling my best story at the time to my date for the evening, and she looked at me, and she said, "Am I supposed to be impressed?" Strike two! It was time to dance. I did not, and still cannot, shag. Strike two point five! At some point later, for some reason, the young men were lifting their dates onto their shoulders. Now, at the time, I was a rugby player, and I thought, "Ah, this is something I can do!" So I offered to lift her. Now, she was attractive, but no lightweight, and I set out to prove that I could, indeed, lift her, no problem! Somewhere between my desire to lift her and her desire that I not even try, one or both of us fell. Strike three! I was out.

This wedding story reminds me of that night. I was invited in, but later on, I was invited to leave. Keep one thing in mind, throughout the Old Testament, God is said to be wed to his people. Also, throughout the Old Testament, God's people are pictured as unfaithful, as we have heard already in the Old Testament reading. Going their own way, aspiring after the other gods, other desires, or just wandering off. God pursues and desires a relationship. We are invited, but sometimes, we don't care. The final chapter of the New Testament brings this wedding and garment imagery together at the wedding of the lamb, as a union of God with his people. Revelation 19:7 says in part, "For the marriage of the lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready, and to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white." Now, just hold that thought. Invited to be wed to God, made ready, scrubbed down and dressed up, clean and pure, the church. Now the early church fathers connected many Scriptural themes in this parable, themes that you already know, but may never have connected before. Picture this first. Do you remember your children's Bible picture book and Adam and Eve there in the garden, in close communion with God, and always in that picture book, some cleverly placed foliage and branches because Adam and Eve, in a state of bliss and innocence, were completely unaware of themselves and unashamed of their nakedness and had nothing to hide from God nor from each other. The lies had not yet started. The blaming had not yet started. The walls of separation were not yet up between men and women and God. You know the story. When they sinned, when they lied, when they blamed each other and God, and got themselves thrown out, the first thing they did was clothe themselves, first with a fig leaf, and then after the killing of some animals, animal skins, and soon after, there was the killing of each other and their children, Cane and Abel. It is a mythic story, but it is also true. The truth is, in our hearts, even though we were not there, the truth is that deep in our hearts we know things were supposed to be different than this. We were supposed to love, not kill each other. We feel the wrongness of murder. We feel the wrongness of death itself. We also feel, I believe, a sense that God was, at some point, nearer and more available. We yearn for that time, almost as if we remember a time when God was nearer and we were purer and more innocent and unashamed. Now, between us there are

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walls and coverings of all sorts, from fabric covered in labels to car metal covered in insignias to homes covered in brick or whatever to lawns covered with grass greener than your neighbor's, but one way or another, one sort of covering or another, we seek to protect our image and conceal our insecurities or project a false front to gain one thing or another, but who are we really, no matter with what we cover ourselves? When did sin become a problem between God and me?

In “Reader's Digest,” a writer wrote in, Robert Shalter, he said “The disability claims department where I was employed used a form that did not always fit the situation as evidenced by one applicant's responses. Question 1: When did your impairment first begin to affect you? Answer: When I fell off the loading dock. Question 2: At what point, did your condition become severe enough to prevent you from doing your job? Answer: When I hit the ground.”

How long has sin impaired our relationship with God and each other? Since we hit the ground. Think of another Bible story we all know. The wild man from the woods, John the Baptist, he came preaching repentance. He said, “God's coming, get ready.” God is coming through his Savior bringing healing and forgiveness and hope, but first strip off your pride, strip off your pretense, strip off your projections and your false fronts of goodness and get down and dirty into the River Jordan. You see, baptism was not a new thing. It was done by Jews as one more kind of ritual cleansing, a kind of ritual cleansing for either Gentiles or a Jewish reprobate, who had publicly sinned, and now wanted either in or back in the Jewish community. John the Baptist was saying confess your sin by publicly plunging in the river Jordan, and you will be ritually cleaned in a time-tested Jewish way for the coming of the Messiah. What did John the Baptist wear? Oddly, or as the other church fathers thought appropriately, he wore raw animal skins, like Adam and Eve did just after they were thrown out, animal skins of the most primitive sort reminding us of our condition. Thrown out and cast out away from God and out of love and out of trust with each other, from beautiful innocence down to the almost animal existence. John the Baptist was saying take off your pretense and your pretending, take off your imitation, self-actualized smiles and confess that you know, and you know God knows, what selfishness and pride and anger and desire and unhealed bitterness remain in your soul. Repent, especially those of you who pretend to have nothing of which to repent! Repent and be baptized and get ready to meet God. Get ready because, right now, you're not. You know the rest of that story. The public sinners, who could not pretend to be Holy, they came in droves, and they knew they were not ready to meet God, but the pretenders who had enough money to cover themselves in respectability and went to synagogue and wore the finest clothing, they were not about to dip in that muddy stream with this wild man. It might ruin their expensive robes. It might ruin their image. They did not want to be near those happy, cleansed people coming up out of the river either because, you know, there is an old saying “nothing in the world is friendlier than a wet dog” or a forgiven sinner. Another robe story by Jesus. It's telling when you tie it into this theme. The prodigal son spent his life with wild and wasteful living and so he came to himself. He came to himself, and he realized that life out in the wilderness, away from God, is empty. The prodigal came to himself, and he remembered in his heart that he had a loving father back home. When he saw his need, and he thought of his father's goodness, he literally repented, and repented just means he turned around. He turned away from the wilderness wandering and he returned to God, his Father. When we do, we find out just as the prodigal found, that

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God is even more loving than we imagined. In Jesus' story, do you know what the first thing is that the father gave his wandering son, now come home? What was the first thing? Do you remember? In Luke 15:22, he told his servant, “Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him.” Then a ring, and then shoes, and then kill the fatted calf, and let us eat and make merry for this son of mine was dead, and he is alive again. He was lost and now, he is found. Let us party. The robe covered his road filth, covered his sins, his sinful journey home, and the ring signified sunset, and a party was planned. Now, Jesus actually begins this parable with Luke 15:10, there is joy before the angels of God over the sinner who repents. That is the verse just before the entire prodigal son story. So the entire prodigal son story of coming home filthy, repentive, and being re-robed and reclaimed and celebrated is an illustration of there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. What a God we have! But notice the theme, sin is serious.

Now, many of us, we might use our reputation or our education or our standing in the community to hide our sin, and pretend that sin is something other people do, but they and we, we just grab onto our piece of debris, and we float through life, forgetting that we are all shipwrecked together. Jesus had trouble with the Pharisees and the scribes and the church goers, who thought they were okay with God, or at least thought they projected okay enough to convince other people. They must have known they were far from God. I know that I am far from God when I am rationalizing hate, rationalizing judgment, rationalizing wasteful or indulgent spending when I am withholding money from the church hoping someone else will pay, when I am nice to someone's face and talk mean behind their back, when I'm angry at the success of others or I am jealous, when I am dismissive of the simple needs of children, when I am – fill in the blank. At some time or another, I have been all those things, and if you leave here thinking less of me, instead shaking your head and saying, “Me, too!” Lord, help you! Dressed to impress. We cover ourselves with thoughts of “I've never!” “Not me!”

What should you wear to meet God? That is today's question in the parable. What should you wear to meet God? What is appropriate? Should it be our best silk tie or scarf or perfect attendance pin for Sunday school since 1938 or a Methodist cross and flame along with a Roman Catholic crucifix, a Star of David, a yarmulke just to cover the bases? Now the answer in the parable is echoed in a popular hymn we've all sung. “My Hope Is Built” Now, listen to these words, you've sung them a thousand times, but in verse four, “When He shall come with trumpets sound, oh may I then in Him be found, dressed in His righteousness alone, thoughtless to stand before the throne, on Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

Paul took the analogy of wearing Christ's righteousness and of putting on Christ's righteousness and of trusting God as Abraham did and the trust and the faith was accounted to him as righteousness even though old Abe sinned and so do we. God wants us to trust, and to trust in the one He has sent, Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul said, “If you must boast about something, boast to Christ Jesus.” Sin is real, and the wall that it puts between others and us is real. I know congregations hate it when preachers use the S word, sin. They say, “Preacher, please don't tell us about sin. Don't tell us everything.”

Barbara Brockhoff tells about a mother, who told her son to take some homemade butter house to house to sell it, and she said, “Get fifty cents a pound for it if you can, but if you

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can't get fifty cents, get twenty-five.” The boy went to the first house, and he knocked on the door, and he asked the man if he wanted to buy some butter. “How much is it?” the man asked. Well, the boy quoted his mother, and said, “Mama said to get fifty cents if I could, but if not, to take twenty-five.” The man said, “Son, I'm going to teach you a lesson. I'm going to take a pound of your butter, and I'm going to give you this quarter, but you need to learn not to tell everything you know. If you hadn't told me that you'd take a quarter, I would have been glad to give you fifty cents!” He gave him the quarter. The little boy said, “Yes, sir, but I didn't tell you everything I know. I didn't say nothing about the cat falling into the cream.”

Sin is real, and the wall it puts between us and God is real, and we might as well tell it. We might as well say everything. The invitation from God to anyone who will come is also real, but if you think for one minute that you have lived an internal and external life that is sin-free and did not require the blood of Christ to atone, then you're on your own! You're walled off from God and the need of the gift of God's grace, and you're walled off also from whom you really are. We are sinners, selfish at heart, and doomed to solitary empty lives without God's intervention, but the good news of the Gospel is that God did intervene in Jesus Christ! Because of his righteousness, we are healed. Because of His holiness, we are counted holy. Because of His sacrifice, our judgment is satisfied. We can come home, home into God's waiting arms, and more than that, we can become different. Not dwelling in the wilderness, but come to ourselves in our right minds and the right relationship with God and with others, we can actually begin to love and to forgive and to do holy, righteous things for the right reasons. God's spirit within us enables us to change and grow and do unselfish, loving, forgiving, generous things, without counting the cost. The king provides the robe in the parable. Take it! It is the imputed righteousness of Christ that God graciously provides to us through faith. To wrap up the theme that I began in the garden, you may be surprised to hear this verse from way back, the prophet Isaiah 61:10, “My soul shall exalt in my God for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as the bridegroom decks himself with the garland and as the bride adorns herself with her jewels. You see, God providing what we need, to return to relationship with God is an old, old theme. It's not about offending God's fashion sense. This is about God providing what we need to return as a child of God, to the party that is prepared for all sinners, tired of wandering in the wilderness and the emptiness of the world. My soul shall exalt in my God for he hath clothed me. In the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness. So swallow your pride, and remove whatever respectable coverings we've accumulated and throw yourself on the mercy of God and Christ! You'll find what the prodigal found. You'll find what the prodigal found. God our Father waiting with arms open. Wesley ended his sermon this way, on this passage. He said, “The God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made, but He will not force them to accept of it. He leaves them in the hands of their own counsel. He saith, “Behold, I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life that you may live. Choose holiness by my grace, which is the way, the only way to everlasting life.” He cries aloud, “Behold and be happy in this world, and happy in the world to come.” Dressed in his righteousness alone. Faultless I stand before the throne. We greet our God one day. By faith, we shall one day pierce all the way through this veil of tears, one day pierce all the way through this dark glass between us, all the way through, and we shall see God face to face. You will find God with arms wide open, welcoming us in to stay, to stay forever. Amen.