

“What Is the Dress Code in God’s Realm?”

Matthew 22:1–14

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In an article in this month’s issue of *The Christian Century*, Episcopal priest and author Kit Carlson says that when her daughter was in college, she worked a couple summers at an upscale resort (October 2026, p. 25). It was so fancy that it had a dress code which required guests in the public areas to dress in “elevated evening attire” which, among other things, meant no shorts or denim was allowed.

Carlson decided to visit her daughter on her day off and take her to dinner at the resort. They both came dressed for the occasion and looked forward to a fine meal, but as they headed into the lobby in their elevated evening attire, they noticed a tall man in jeans having an intense conversation with the maître d’. The strictness of the dress code was about to be confirmed. The maître d’ shook his head, no denim was allowed, and so the man sighed and walked away.

It was only then that they noticed the man was a Hollywood actor, not the biggest star, but a moderately famous man. Apparently, he was the type to test the rules, but these rules held, even for him — no shorts or denim allowed — period!

Most of us find this level of elitism unattractive, though some people push the limits of “informal” these days, but we don’t really like fussy exclusiveness. Yet it is still found, even in the church. In one setting, I tried to convince people to relax their dress code on Sunday morning — yes, *I* tried, the man who wears a coat and tie all the time — but the church was near a lake. Most people who live near water don’t want to get dressed up on a regular basis. Many of these people had much in common with us, they would enrich church life greatly, but they weren’t dressing formally for anything. I could not convince the church.

Even here I remember a deacons meeting nearly seventeen years ago in which an older deacon was concerned with deacons not dressing appropriately. Another older deacon who grew up in the same generation with

the same values, said, “I don’t know about that. It seems to me Jesus interacted with people from all walks of life, and he didn’t seem to be concerned with how people dressed.” It was a fascinating exchange. The concern was heard, but no action was taken.

To be fair, there is value in putting on our best for God, but each person’s best varies. How we dress can become a means of exclusion. And in the end, we are called to be who we are before God, to be honest and not put on pretenses before the One who already knows us better than we know ourselves.

All of this explains why many of us struggle with Matthew’s version of a parable about a great banquet. In Luke’s version of this parable, when the first invitees to a banquet refuse to come, the host sends invitations to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame — the outcasts of the time — a sign that all are welcome in God’s realm. We can embrace that message and connect it to everything we know about Jesus.

But in Matthew’s version, when the first invitees refuse to come, some of them do violence to the host’s servants, and thus the host sends troops to kill them. Subsequently, the host has the servants invite anyone and everyone on the street, the good and the bad, so that the banquet hall is filled with guests. At this point, the message is similar to the one in Luke’s version, with a little violence added.

But then, one guest is found not to be wearing a wedding robe, at which point, the host, in this version, a king, has him cast out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “For many are called, but few are chosen,” says Jesus. Really?! All are welcome, but if you are not dressed appropriately, to you-know-where with you?! No wonder most of us like Luke’s version better.

But what do we make of all this? What is the parable really saying? What is Jesus’ point? Well, one thing we need to understand is that Matthew is shaping this story for his context. All the Gospel writers do this. It doesn’t mean the narratives are not rooted in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It’s just that each writer reframes the story for specific people at a specific time, and God uses all these narratives to point us toward sacred truths.

Matthew presents Jesus as a new Moses, a legitimate heir to the Davidic line, which is of particular interest for early believers of Jewish background. He also sees a need to underscore Jesus' superiority over other Jewish leaders at the time. So, in this parable, like several others we have read recently, there is a heavy hand of judgment on these leaders. The scribes and Pharisees are the object of humiliation, the conflict with them is intense, hence the violence in the parable.

But while holding Jesus in high regard fits with Christian tradition, we need to be careful not to read these stories in a way that not only affirms him over and above other leaders in his time but also supports supersessionism, the idea that Christian faith replaces Jewish faith completely, and thus Jews are no longer God's people, which can lead to anti-Semitism. Jesus himself is Jewish, as are all his disciples. Understanding the context of any writing provides insight into its focus. The concern here is with some leaders, not all Jewish people.

But the other thing we need to keep in mind is that this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It is not an instruction manual for the dress code in God's realm, at least not in a literal sense, we will come back to this. The details of parables are signs and symbols of other things. We need to understand the world in which they are set to get the point, but we should not confuse them with the point.

So, with these realities in mind, let's take another look at the parable. The message is about the inclusion of all people in God's realm, the good and the bad, all are welcome! This squares with other images of God's concern in scripture. While much of the Hebrew canon focuses on Israel as God's chosen nation, it is chosen to be a light to all nations. Our reading from Isaiah 25 says that the great future day when God will wipe away all tears includes all nations, and until that day arrives, God demonstrates a particular concern for the poor and needy. No one is left out of the scene, which is pictured as a magnificent feast, as in Matthew.

In like manner, Jesus welcomes all people in his ministry, especially the marginalized and outcast. He is criticized for doing so, for spending too much time with tax collectors and prostitutes. "Surely he can't be a man of God!" the pious proclaim. But he insists these are the people who need him most, the

well have no need for a physician, and his calling is to let all people know they are embraced by God's love.

Churches have had various heated debates over the years as to whether to embrace certain people as members — persons of color, LGBT people, even people of mixed race in one setting not very far from here — none of the churches there would accept them, so a new church was formed. But rather than asking who is welcome, the real question for any church is, “Who is not welcome?” and there isn't much Jesus material to justify filling in the blank with anyone.

I have shared with many of you before my favorite Fred Craddock story. When he was a young minister, he served a church in small-town Tennessee. It didn't have many members, but it had a lot of pride in being the established church for the right kind of people. When a new factory came to town and a trailer park community sprang up with lots of newcomers, young Fred suggested that the church reach out to them. These folk needed a spiritual home and the church needed people. The church refused, saying, “They are not our kind of people.”

Years later, Professor Craddock returned to the town. When he drove up to the building, he saw that the parking lot was packed, inside every pew was full, it was a marvelous sight! Of course, it was now a barbecue restaurant, the church had died long ago, and Fred said he gave thanks to God the church had died because if it had not, most of the people in the room would not have been welcome.

It is a sobering tale, but one all churches need to hear. We are always just one generation away from extinction. There are numerous things that can prevent that from happening, but it all begins with a willingness to be as welcoming as Jesus, no more and no less.

But what about the man without a wedding robe? If this is not a teaching about the dress code for God's realm, what is it? This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, filled with rich symbolism rooted in sacred history. As in the reading from Isaiah, God's realm is pictured as a great banquet, and through the centuries the church has considered various theories as to what the robe or clothing might represent.

For me, the explanation that makes the most sense is found by reading the text in light of the imagery of Revelation 19:8. It says that God will clothe

the church “with fine linen, bright and pure - for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.” Clothing here refers to righteous deeds, a manner of life shaped by God’s design, as revealed in the teachings of Jesus. All are welcome, but once we join the party, we are expected to conduct ourselves appropriately. All scripture offers guidance on what such a life looks like, but there are several places where we can find a helpful digest of what is involved.

Our reading from Philippians presents one option. We are to spend time thinking about what is true and honorable, just and pure, pleasing and commendable, excellent and worthy of praise – and then act in accordance with these thoughts. We might consider the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are noble qualities with which to clothe ourselves. We might also consider The Sermon on the Mount or Jesus’ words about Judgment Day recorded in Matthew 25, words about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger and visiting those in prison.

There is no great mystery about what God envisions in the beloved community. What Jesus desires in the way of sacrificial love and selfless service is not a secret. Our challenge is not knowing what to do, it is doing it. But while this is ever a work-in-progress, and thus we all need grace, we can at least be clear about what the dress code is in God’s realm. It’s not about what clothing we wear but whether we adorn our lives with righteous deeds — acts of love and kindness, words of mercy and forgiveness, help for the poor and the stranger among us.

When I was young, an array of people shared meals at our table, and a range of behavior was tolerated, fortunately, as I remember having trouble opening a ketchup packet and spraying it all over someone. But if you used racist language, demeaned someone’s character because of gender, or were meanspirited, you could be removed from the table, and given that my father was a former SAS operative, size was no obstacle.

Something like this is going on at the end of Jesus’ parable. All Jesus wants is that we remember how he wants us to treat each other. That doesn’t seem like too much to ask, since it is his party.