Sunday, October 10, 1999
WHAT'S THE DRESS CODE?
Matthew 22:1-14

This will sound strange to some of you, but when I was in college in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the social fraternity of which I was a member had a strict dress code for the evening meal five days a week. If you wanted to eat in the fraternity house dining room on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights, you were required to wear a coat and necktie. Dinner was not served from a buffet. We were all seated banquet style. Seated at the head table were the president, the treasurer, the vice-president, the song leader, and the housemother. Following the singing of a table grace, dinner was served. After eating, announcements were made, and a few more songs were sung before we adjourned for the evening.

Later, when I was at Yale Divinity School, there was a continuing discussion among faculty and students about proper dress for attending class. There were no required rules, but the unwritten expectation was that you would dress in an appropriate fashion, which meant no sloppy clothes.

Another seminary I heard about had a major difference of opinion between students and faculty regarding proper dress for classes. The faculty felt strongly that informal dress was out of place. The students, on the other hand, were all for casual apparel. The debate took the form of posting Bible passages on the bulletin board. The faculty would quote:

"Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city." Isaiah 51:2

Whereupon the students would reply:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on." Matthew 6:25

We still talk about dress codes in our time. Some cruise ships let you know what the dress code is for the evening meal each day in the main dining room. One night it might be "formal," another night, "elegantly casual," and another time, "informal."

Many businesses today have adopted various dress codes, with Friday being the one labeled "casual."

It is not uncommon for us today, when we receive an invitation to some special event, to inquire about what is considered proper dress for the occasion if we are not sure. It's not unusual to hear a family member say, "But I have nothing appropriate to wear. I'll have to buy a new outfit." Many times, the invitation will suggest the kind of dress expected. Invitations to pre-game football parties frequently say, "Game attire." And most people have on some shade or item of red when attending a Nebraska game. An invitation to a fancy banquet might state, "formal" or "black tie."

There's also a continuing discussion about what is proper dress for private and public schools and whether or not school uniforms are a good idea.

Most of us would agree, I think, that what a person wears can have some effect on behavior, although it's certainly not automatic. There's an old saying, "Clothes make the person." Another old saying is, "No matter how many alterations, cheap pants never fit."

All of this came to my mind as I was studying the parable which Jesus told about the marriage feast. The story begins by telling us that the people who were at first invited all turned down the invitation, even though it came from the king. They didn't take the invitation seriously and made all kinds of excuses for not being able to attend. Some of those who turned down the invitation even killed the slaves who delivered the invitation. The king then sent other messengers to invite anyone they could find to come to the party, the good and the bad.

As the king moved among the guests, he noticed a man who was not dressed properly for a wedding banquet. The man did not say that he had rushed over directly from the office, or that he had no tuxedo, or that there was no time to change. He was without excuse, which must have meant that he did not consider the occasion important enough to change his clothes. The king said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then he had the man thrown out.

I think we would all admit that there are parts of this story that do not sound like Jesus. He was not what might be called a "stuffed shirt." He never took formalities as seriously as the ecclesiastical officials did, nor was he as strict as the religious authorities regarding the law.

But remember, it's a parable, a story. It should not surprise us that Jesus used a marriage banquet as a metaphor for participating in God's community. We're going to look more closely at the dress code issue contained in the story in a moment, but first let's consider the overall meaning of the parable. The story is telling us that being a part of God's community can be compared to a huge, joyful banquet, and it centers around God's invitation. God invites us, which is different from giving an order. We're not invited because we've earned it or because we deserve it, but because God loves us and wants us there. We can say "yes" or "no" to the invitation.

But if it's such a joyful, fun occasion, why would some people turn it down? It's not difficult to understand why someone might decline an invitation to an event that was going to be depressing, but why refuse an invitation to a celebration?

I can think of two reasons. First, maybe those who were initially invited rejected the invitation because they thought the party was going to be boring and dull. Remember, Jesus is using the banquet as a metaphor for being a part of God's community. Some religion is boring and dull. Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say that a lot of people have just enough religion to make them miserable.

We Christians do not put enough emphasis on the fact that Jesus most frequently described God's community as being like a fantastic banquet, a time of joy and happiness. Your religious faith should add enchantment to your life.

If creation is a blessing, as our faith says it is, then our proper response is to enjoy it. Pleasure of this kind is one of the deepest spiritual experiences. Ecstasy is the experience of God. But this kind of pleasure does not come easily if your main emphasis is getting more and more for yourself, or if you keep emphasizing your sin and unworthiness.

God's invitation is a call to delight in God's creation, to savor it. To savor is to enjoy something for itself. It is to appreciate, to be grateful, rather than to appraise. Far too often our only question is, "What's it worth?" rather than enjoying it for what it is.

To enjoy God, to laugh, to sing, to dance, to take pleasure in God's creation has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives. In fact, it's often been the opposite. We are asked by some overly religious person, "Did you take pleasure in it?" as a test of whether or not an action was a sin. People on moral crusades are frequently grim and unsmiling.

So maybe those who were at first invited were afraid it was going to be a dull party made up of overly serious, dull, and boring religious people. However, I think most of them refused the invitation for the opposite reason — they were afraid of joy. I think deep down within themselves, they knew it was going to be a joyful party with lots of singing, dancing, and laughter, and they didn't have time for that kind of thing. The story says, "they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business."

There are people in our time also who are afraid of joy, afraid to celebrate and have a good time. They are unhappy with life and want others to be unhappy too. They are convinced that the world is no good, and any time there appears any evidence to the contrary, they do their best to avoid it. The old saying is "Misery loves company." Misery not only loves company, it demands it. If you aren't having a good time, you don't want anyone else to have a good time either.

This being afraid of joy might explain why, in the story, such people not only refused the invitation to the party but reacted with hostility. They seized the messengers, treated them shamefully, and killed them. They didn't like the message, so they killed the messenger.

But God's party is held regardless. The king now sent his messengers to invite everyone, the good and the bad. God holds the party no matter how many refuse the invitation.

What a picture of God's community. There they are, all seated around the table — the beggars, the prostitutes, the nobodies, the forgotten — all enjoying God's banquet. They are not afraid of joy.

But what about this poor fellow who didn't follow the dress code and was thrown out? Remember, this is a parable, and most Biblical commentators claim that the term "wedding robe" is used as a metaphor. This person is at a party but still in a foul mood. He has not allowed himself to be clothed with joy. Rather, his gloomy, depressing presence and complaining spirit is beginning to affect the whole mood of the party. So the host confronts him, and the guest is speechless. "Either put on a proper attitude or be thrown out," he tells him. Nobody wants a sour-puss at a party for very long.

It is here that the parable told by Jesus causes us to ask, "What's the dress code?" There are various types of "improper dress" which can keep us from experiencing the joy of God's presence, God's banquet. Here's my short list of the wrong kind of clothes — those that do not satisfy the dress code.

It's difficult to enjoy and appreciate God's presence and the company of others when we wear the coat of self-righteousness or the clothes of arrogance.

My parents, grandparents, and their ancestors before them never had the privilege of going to college. My brother and I and my four sisters were the first generation to go beyond high school. I can remember that when I came home now and then, I all too often wanted to show off my sophomoric wisdom to my dad. That coat of arrogance created by a little knowledge had to be taken off if I wanted to be in a good relationship with him and the rest of the family. Looking back, I am surprised that my parents were as patient with me as they were. The arrogance created by a little knowledge is a coat too often worn by many of us.

Related to that kind of clothing is the wearing of the robe of not being open to new truth because we are sure we already know it all. That too can keep us from truly enjoying the presence of God and the friendship of others.

Another item on my list of the wrong kind of clothing to wear at any time, and especially if we want to experience the joy of being a part of God's community, is the coat of envy or jealousy. Envy is always improper dress. It never meets the dress code for any kind of party, and especially a celebration to which you have been invited by God.

In addition, we cannot enjoy the party in God's community when we are wearing the clothing of hate toward another person or group.

In a remarkable book published years ago, entitled Happiness is a Choice, the author Barry Neil Kaufman tells about a conversation he had with another parent. Kaufman and his wife had a child who, when born, was found to be neurologically impaired. He and his wife later wrote a book about the uplifting journey their family took to heal their special child. One day, he talked with a man who had written quite a different saga. He documented what he experienced as the difficult and damning reality of parenting a "less-than-perfect youngster." He declared without apology to Kaufman that he hated people like him. He said to Kaufman, "You take something that's terrible and make believe it's beautiful." Kaufman considered his point of view for a moment and then said softly in reply, "Did you ever consider that you might be taking something that's beautiful and making it terrible?"

Clothes can make the person, especially the kind of attitude clothing we wear. What is the dress code for enjoying the banquet in God's community? Take off the old robes of self-righteousness, arrogance, envy, greed, and hate. Add a smile to your face and put on the clothing of humility, gratitude, joy, expectancy, and reverence for God. Amen.