

## “Feast”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 23

Isaiah 25:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

To start this sermon, please tell me something. What are you wearing? Really. Tell me, tell each other. Write it in the Facebook comments. And be honest. Are you still wearing pajamas? Did you dress as if going to church, so that you have some semblance of marking time?

From JCrew to JCPenny, from Century 21 to Neiman Marcus, clothing retailers have announced bankruptcy and closings. Because truly, all people want to wear are yoga pants, sweatpants, and pajamas bottoms. Sure, they may dress up the top if they are on zoom meetings for work, but anything's a go on the bottom. And I confess, I have been in zoom meetings with some of you, where what I wore on the bottom did not match what I was wearing on the top!

I know that some of you would have it that way, even when the pandemic is over: just wear whatever you want, wherever you go. And I mostly agree. But some days, I do long for a reason to pull out something sparkly and formal, get a blowout in my hair, nails done, and even go through the bothersome rituals of full makeup and heels. I want to be at a feast; not just in the sense of abundant food and drink, but in the sense of abundant community, abundant reason to celebrate, and I want to wear the kinds of things that set apart that moment of outside the ordinary-- especially, outside of this pandemic, which has become shockingly ordinary to us, as we have learned to live our lives in masks, distanced, and close to home, if not at home.

Jesus' parable of the wedding feast has lots of surprising twists, and ends up with a harsh judgment about something you'd expect Jesus never to care about: what people wear. The parable is extreme and absurd, and I believe that is on purpose but I can't quite imagine why. Let's look at some of the odd bits of the parable, and then see if the Spirit will help us make any sense of it.

The first absurd thing that happens is that the king sends out wedding invitations for his son's wedding banquet, but everyone invited from the expected, high society list, finds a reason they cannot attend: Oh, I have to tend to my farm! Oh, I had a business... thingy I needed to do. Can you imagine? Prince Harry and Meghan Markle got married at Westminster Abbey on May 19, 2018. But if I had gotten the invitation, would I have told them, "I cannot possibly go, your royal highness, for May 19 is the day our church has planned its Annual Garage Sale!" Of course not!

And most certainly, I would not have beaten and killed the servants who had delivered such an invitation-- no matter how I feel about the role of the crown in British parliamentary organization; we simply have bigger fish (and chips) to fry here in my own country.

The next absurd thing that happens in this parable is that the king then sends his servants out into the streets, to pull in everyone they can find: the good, the bad, the homeless, the wealthy-- it didn't matter, for there was a party, so just fling the doors of the banquet hall wide open!

This absurd bit of the parable is the part I love most. It's about the promiscuous love of God. At God's party, at God's feast, we must be ready to be completely surprised by who shows up. At times it is a struggle, but I suspect that because our church is so open to these surprises is why we have such a vibrant membership.

If the parable stopped there, I think it would make a great parable and make my preaching quite easy. However, the parable takes yet another surprising turn: one who shows up at the party-- presumably, someone who came in off the streets-- shows up not wearing a wedding robe. "Why did you show up not wearing a wedding robe?" the king asks the man-- who is speechless. He just cannot answer. Then, the king summons his servants, demanding that this guest be bound hand and foot then thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Now, most marriages need to be prepared to have some element of weeping and gnashing of teeth-- whether of the couples' own making, or as they face together whatever the world throws at them. But to banish this wedding guest in such a way, just because he didn't have the right clothes? It doesn't seem very Jesus-y at all, does it?

I mean, I remember when my daughter turned 6 and passed birthday party invitations to her class at school. One child received the invitation, and then upon reading that the party would be held at the church, ripped it up and threw the invitation on the floor, then announced, "Your birthday party sounds dumb. My cousin is having her party at a salon. We will all be getting mani-pedis and updos. I don't want to come to your stupid party." Then, when this child *did* arrive at the party, unannounced, I have to admit, I had some strong feelings. But even then, I did not usher her out into the utter darkness; I just might have served her cake last, and "forgotten" to serve her a juicebox; my more-forgiving kid was just glad that she came. Surely Jesus would present God's love as even more gracious, more generous, than *that*?!

I suspect Jesus preaches this parable directly to people who aren't surprised anymore in their faith. Like a marriage that has gone stale, where partners take one another for granted, if they even notice each other, the people to whom Jesus was preaching had taken God for granted. They had been invited to the banquet, and not only had they not noticed the sumptuous feast set before them; they also hadn't even bothered to borrow a robe from the coat check attendant.

I don't think Jesus is telling us we can't pray in our pajamas or worship in our workout clothes. What he gives us in this parable is an offering, an invitation, to not merely show up and occupy

space, but to immerse ourselves in our worship, in our prayer. What might it look like to wear God's love in a way that covers your body?

I think I saw what it looks like. I saw it yesterday, when I visited Pete and Susan. Pete had just come home from the hospital after suffering a massive heart attack on Tuesday. When I got the phone call from Susan, Pete was in surgery. As Susan, in shock, reported, he had coded three times. I dropped to the floor and offered Susan-- who, because of COVID restrictions-- had to be by herself in a conference room, waiting for the surgeon's report on the outcome-- prayer. With a heavy heart, I knew that the situation was dire, and that we could lose Pete. What Susan would learn after Pete came out of surgery is that Pete's heart had stopped a total of 22 times. But, hallelujah! Pete came out of surgery! Not only that, but his progress has been rapid, and by yesterday he was home. Now, I know that Pete is a man of deep faith, and one who has lived his life with integrity. I know both Pete and Susan are people who pray. But I also know that there are people with just as deep faith, just as strong integrity, and perhaps an even richer prayer life, who do not come out with such happy outcomes. I think Pete and Susan know this too.

But when I saw Pete and Susan, they were both covered in garments of gladness. They were robed with smiles and with tears of joy. They were in amazed gratitude at the feast that has been set before them. Among the emails I received in response to the prayers I asked from the congregation for Pete, I received two emails from women who had spent time at a shelter in our town-- these are people who could have been kicked out onto the street, or maybe not even survived the violence they faced in their home. But they found a safe space at this shelter, and they saw Pete as one person who helped ensure that safety. Each one of your prayers was a taste at the feast of abundance.

I think Pete and Susan know that the feast was there all along. But now, perhaps, they will drink in each person there, taste each morsel of food (perhaps now with less salt), and share abundantly what is presented at their table. I left their home wanting to pull a garment of gladness over my head too, I was so surprised and amazed by what I had witnessed.

Hear these words from Isaiah, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever."

And this, from the Psalmist: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows."

So go ahead now. Step into the robe, and prepare to be surprised and amazed at what you find at the feast.