

NO SHIRT...NO SHOES...NO SERVICE

October 9, 2011

If you asked my Dad what his favorite food was, he would tell you steak: T-bone, broiled beyond all semblance of juiciness or flavor. “Steak,” as he said, “Well, well, well done.” Now that’s probably because his family was dirt poor; the family where he grew up. That’s probably because the best meal they ever got was bread and gravy. Dad’s childhood deprivation made him very frugal, except when it came to steak. He loved steak, but he didn’t like to pay for it in a restaurant. In a restaurant, a dollar hamburger seemed like a luxury to him.

That was true until Mom and Dad’s friends Dorothy and Bud took them out one evening to a restaurant in St. Louis. They had to cross the river to that restaurant in St. Louis named Al Baker’s. Al Baker’s was so wonderful that Dad couldn’t stop talking about it. And he decided that we should go back, all of us – me, too – on Sunday.

I had never been in a restaurant so elegant. It was simply spectacular. There was walnut paneling covering all the walls, and there were leather chairs in the area where you first came in. And there was a person just standing there, seeming to me like that person was doing nothing. He was the maitre d’. I was overwhelmed. And then I noticed that the maitre d’ was focusing on me. And he said to me and to my parents: ***“The young man cannot dine here. He does not have a jacket.”*** I was mortified. Well, they found an old one, you know, in the lost and found. It had a lot of food stains on it and it was about four sizes too big, but it was a jacket. So I put it on and we had dinner at Al Baker’s. Now I have to tell you that I don’t remember the food; I just remember the embarrassment. That restaurant had a dress code, and I was not dressed appropriately for it.

Schools have dress codes. I remember in my high school that the dean of girls, Miss Pattison, had a ruler and she would go around measuring girls’ skirts from the knee up to the hem to see if they were too short. And, if they were, home they went! As for the boys: they could not be wearing shorts if it was before May 1. It was a dress code. Maybe your school has one or had one, too.

Churches have had dress codes, and pretty much I think they’ve been unwritten. When we moved here from St. Louis almost seventeen years ago, I noticed (should I tell you?) that the dress in Green Bay is just a little more casual in church than it was there. It’s unwritten. It’s habit. It’s custom. Churches have often said to us that we need to wear our Sunday best to honor God. And restaurants? Restaurants even restaurants that aren’t elegant like Al Baker’s have dress codes, too. And you know what they say in those restaurants, those family restaurants, that do have standards. They say simply: **No Shirt...No Shoes...No Service!** And for social events, sometimes the invitation will say black tie. You know it’s formal. And even more formal than black tie is what? White tie. There are social events you dare not show up at in the clothes you wear every day. Dress codes.

Well, Jesus tells us a story this morning about a social event that had a dress code. The social event was a wedding banquet for the prince, for the king’s son. And the dress code was very simply this: every guest needed to be wearing a wedding robe. And, like Al Baker’s, the king had a supply. If you didn’t bring one, you’d get one.

For this wedding banquet, there was a long list of invited guests, but the invited guests decided they had better things to do. They weren't going to come. So, the invitation from the king was issued abroad throughout the kingdom on the main street: *Y'all come. Come to my son's wedding banquet. Celebrate with him.* And they did. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But one of those guests was not wearing a wedding robe. And what did the king do with him? He threw him out. He sent him home. And it wasn't very pretty. He was bound hand and foot and thrown out the door. That's what the king did because this guest wasn't wearing a wedding robe.

You know, even though our society doesn't place a very high value anymore on dress codes (at least formal ones), we'd still notice if someone came to a wedding reception wearing a T-shirt and ripped jeans. We'd say: *Don't they know. Don't they understand where they are?* This guest who didn't bother to put on a wedding robe had dissed his host. He didn't care enough about the bride and groom to dress up for the event, and he didn't care enough about the king to do that, either. This guest hadn't come to celebrate the wedding. He'd simply come to feed his face and to guzzle the wine. It sounded like the best thing he could find to do that particular day. He was there to consume, to indulge, to take advantage of the king's generosity, and then go home full and sleepy. That guest, that wedding guest without the wedding robe, was focused on himself, not on the king. And he found out what happens when you do that. So, that's the story.

But the question for us, dear friends, is this: Why are we here at this place? Why are we together here in this room? Are we here to celebrate God's amazing love and God's abundant grace? Are we here because we want to find our place in God's kingdom? Or, have we come simply to consume and indulge? Are we here to take advantage of God's amazing grace and endless love? Are we here for God and God's kingdom, or for ourselves and our kingdoms? Why do we come? Or, in the words of the story:

ARE YOU WEARING YOUR WEDDING ROBE?

What we wear, you know, says a lot about what we value. It's how we honor our hosts...and how we honor ourselves. How we dress says a lot about what we value, and what we think of ourselves, and what we think of others. The Apostle Paul says it a little bit differently. Paul says it this way. He says:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

What is this thing that the Apostle Paul is striving to make his own? Well, it's very simply *the way of Christ, Christ's way for living, and the power of Christ's resurrection.* What Paul presses on to make his own is the sufferings of Jesus and to become like Him in his death that PERHAPS he might become like Him in His resurrection.

Christ Jesus has made me His own. Christ Jesus has made all of us His own. There is no question about that. You should never have any doubt as to whether or not it's true. Christ Jesus has made us His own...absolutely...completely...without a doubt...forever. The question is

this: how do we respond? How do we respond to God's love in Jesus? How do we respond to Christ making us His own? Do we make Jesus our own?

That's the response that Paul was looking for, not only in himself, but in all of us. Becoming like Jesus in our priorities, in our commitments, in our sufferings (that is, the things we care about) and in our sacrifices. The word for this is very simply *discipleship!* – to become like Jesus, to learn and to follow and to change and to grow, to make our lives like the life of our Master.

ARE YOU WEARING YOUR WEDDING ROBE?

That's what it means. Now, the dress code in most churches today is not the one we see plastered on the door of those restaurants that want to make sure their patrons come properly clothed. It's not *No Shirt...No Shoes...No Service*. That's not what the church says. What the church so often says is *Come as you are! Come as you are!* But what we ought to add to that is *Don't stay that way! Come as you are, but don't stay that way!*

You see, the church's mission and vitality are all about changing lives. The church isn't here for us to support us as we are. Rather, it's here to give us the strength and the desire to be changed by the amazing power of God's love!

I know what that means. You know, I was supposed to be an engineer. Many of you have heard that before. I received the Bausch and Lomb Award from my high school. A lot of good that did! I toured the Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey. They were looking for new engineers. A lot of good that did, too! The church's business is changing lives. The purpose of the Christian faith is transforming us – each of us – to become more like Jesus. It is to invite us, and to equip us, and to inspire us to live in God's kingdom.

ARE YOU WEARING YOUR WEDDING ROBE?

This wedding robe – this robe that we are offered to wear – isn't sewn together from cloth. It's woven into our hearts. In his letter to the church at Colossae, the Apostle Paul says this:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves (there's the wardrobe), clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love.

There's the wedding robe. There's the wardrobe of God's kingdom. It is attitude. It is our posture. It's our commitments. It's our compassion. And, of course, the truth is that you can't live in the kingdom if you don't wear the clothes!

ARE YOU WEARING YOUR WEDDING ROBE?

Perhaps for us, it is time to let go of the clothes that cover us up, that fool us into thinking we are what we're not. Maybe it's time to just take off the clothes, and then to put on the clothes that

reveal us for who we are...for who we want to become. We can do that, you know. It doesn't matter what we wear on the outside, but rather what we wear in the lives that we live.

We can do that because Jesus has made us His own. That means we can make Jesus our own. We can follow Jesus and be like Him and, when we do, we invest ourselves in God's kingdom: the kingdom that is a feast of rich food and well-aged wines...and you can eat and drink as much as you want...and it's all wonderful...the kingdom where God swallows up death forever and wipes away every tear from our eyes.

So what are we waiting for? Let's put on those wedding robes. Let us strive every day to make Jesus our own because Christ Jesus has made us His own. And, in the epilogue words of our most beloved psalm of all: ***We shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever!*** Say it with me! ***We shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever!*** Amen.

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October 9, 2011