

**The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2019
St. Paul's, Wilmington, NC
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna**

Mark Twain said: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." I agree with Twain on the first part of his claim, "clothes make the man", but I beg to differ with him on the latter part of his claim. I think naked people have a great deal of influence on society. The naked body is not only the pinnacle of God's creation, it is the inspiration for great art and sculpture; it is also the subject of an industry that produces trillions of dollars in revenue, and infinite losses in human dignity, called the pornography industry. The destructive power of pornography is important to talk about, but you can relax, I'm just tagging it for a future sermon. Today, I want to focus on clothed people.

This morning's gospel from Matthew is, in one sense, about how clothes make the man or woman. The clothes we wear say a lot about us. A couple of weeks ago, I was face timing with my daughter Carson. About 30 seconds into the conversation she said. "What are you wearing, Dad?" I said, "it's a tee shirt." She said, "I know that. What is that logo on it? It's huge, and it's green neon and it looks ridiculous. Don't ever wear that again Dad. You were doing so well." I won't stop wearing the tee shirt because I like it, but in Carson's world, the shirt was a statement of my

status in society— it said, I was weird, out of touch, and didn't belong.

The clothes we wear convey important information about us. Not just our personal tastes and freedom of expression, our clothes make a statement about our economic status, they can be an outward sign of poverty, or of wealth and influence. The clothes we wear can advertise the causes we believe in, or those we protest. Our clothes often play an important role in our vocational identity. The military wear uniforms as do the police and fire fighters. Nurses and doctors wear uniforms. Clergy wear uniforms to make them stand out from others. Want someone to take a second look at you, walk down the street wearing this and you'll be sure to get noticed.

The clerical collar that Adam and I wear is not a fashion accessory, it's part of the uniform. It is sometimes called a dog collar. Mine is made out of plastic because I am cheap, but you can buy linen ones. It's called a dog collar because it is a reminder that we are yoked to God and that God is the one in charge, not us. Clergy are servants of God and the church— unfortunately sometimes a uniform, whether worn by clergy or others, can be misused to manipulate or take advantage of someone.

The parable Jesus tells today is puzzling. Biblical scholars say that the dissonance within it is due to the fact that Matthew has taken two

separate parables told by Jesus about the kingdom of God and mixed them together. We have to untangle them a bit to get this story to make sense. The story seems straight forward enough at first. It compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet to which invitations are delivered to chosen guests by servants. It is a grand feast. Filet mignon is on menu, and there is an open bar, and it is a celebration of life and love. Who would turn that down? It turns out that the intended guests turn down the invitation using the lamest excuses. They go to the unbelievable extreme of killing the servants who delivered the invitation. The King retaliates by destroying the lives of those who spurned the invitation by sending troops to kill them and burn their city. Both parties seem to have over reacted a tad. So what is going on? Remember that Matthew's original audience who are living in the 80' and 90's of the first century, would have understood this story as a allegory about Israel's rejection of Jesus. The King represents God, and the son represents Jesus the Messiah who is sent to usher in the Kingdom of God—but the people of Israel have rejected him utterly. The king, in turn, sends an invitation to others. Again Matthew's audience would have understood that the others, everyone else, the ones on the main streets, were the Gentiles—the rich, the poor, the outcast, the broken, the hungry, the sick, both good and bad. These folks accept the invitation and come to the banquet.

When everything is in full swing, the king notices that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. Inexplicably, he overreacts. He has the guest thrown out into utter darkness. It makes my head spin trying to understand this. It is totally unreasonable to think that random people are walking around in the street wearing tuxes just waiting for the off chance that they will be invited to a party. It doesn't make sense.

So we need to untangle the two harsh responses of the King. In the first part of the story where the King murders the invited guests, Matthew equates the king's reaction that with the war and destruction of the Temple by the Romans which took place in the years 66-70 — Some viewed this as God's punishment to Israel for rejecting the Messiah. It was a naive and incorrect way of explaining the tragedy.

The second part of the story has to do with the Gentiles' response to Jesus' invitation to new life. The point of this story is to say that the invitation requires a readiness to receive on the part of the guest. That readiness is symbolized by the metaphorical clothing one is wearing. In this case, it is the wedding garment. If you really want to dig down into the weeds of Biblical criticism, it is suggested that the wedding garment might refer to early debates among Gentile Christians about whether or

not circumcision would be a requirement for Gentile Christians— an outward sign of commitment to God— just as it was for the Jews. It was decided that circumcision was not necessary. The wedding garment stands as a sign of commitment, a sign of preparedness, readiness to come to the banquet. For early Christians, and for us, the banquet is the Eucharist—the thanksgiving meal we celebrate. The heavenly banquet of the bread of life, and the cup of salvation.

When you get past the puzzling stuff in the story, it simply means that God is calling us to the banquet, and we must be ready. We are not passive actors. We have to do something. To start out, we are make a commitment by being baptized. The wedding garment could refer to our baptism. When you were baptized in the early church you were naked and after you were baptized you would be clothed in a white robe— you were dressed for the occasion.

Those of you who are here today are not worthy to come to the banquet because you made a reservation on Eventbrite, but because you are baptized into Christ body. You have made a commitment to be ready to take on the work of prayer and generosity, the work of peace making and justice. The work of calling people to unity with Christ and with one another.

Paul reminds us that we are to rejoice in the Lord and in the work we are made worthy to do. We are not to worry about anything, because the Lord is near. I think we ought to make that our mission statement. “Do not worry about anything because the Lord is near.” Imagine how that attitude could change our interactions with one another. “Do not worry about anything because the Lord is near.” Don’t worry about the contentious election. Don’t worry about stewardship. Don’t worry about your relationship problems, or your financial challenges. Do not worry about the restrictions of COVID and the ways it has upended our lives. Listen to this though, Paul doesn’t say don’t care about these things, he says don’t worry about them. Instead, pray, give thanks to God and ask God for what we need. God is near. God is here. God is here in the banquet of the Eucharist inviting us into the Kingdom. God is here in our care and concern for others. God is here to empower us to do the things that are excellent, commendable, and worthy of praise. And when we do these things, “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding , will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. “

