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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Proper 23 A

Some of you know that I spent the summer between my middler and senior years at seminary in England. I spent the first half with a marvelous group of six priests and deacons who care for the parishioners of twelve villages. More on that another time. The *second* half of my summer I was resident at Salisbury Cathedral, an architectural gem in the southwest of England with a tower that soars into the sky, reaching for the angels.

The Bishop of Salisbury, David Stanhope, is a stickler for liturgical correctness, and I learned a lot from him. And I heard a story. It seems that the cathedral staff planned to try out a new baptismal font at the Easter Vigil. It was long and deep. It was situated so that the baptismal candidate would enter at the west and emerge at the east, with the Resurrection window reflecting in the water of life.

The only problem was that there wasn't anyone who had come forward to *be* baptized. And so Bishop David sent a couple of his minions out into the streets of Salisbury with the admonition, "Find me a baptismal candidate, and be sure they know they'll be fully immersed."

Somehow, one of these minions found a youngish woman who was enthusiastic about being baptized. She showed up at the appropriate time, answered Bishop David's charges with appropriate humility and reverence, and Bishop David was about to guide her into the waters of baptism.

She removed her full-length wool coat.

And had on absolutely nothing.

M'lord bishop, eyes like a deer caught in the headlights, *quickly* led her into the water, down toward the Resurrection window, and when she emerged there was a Verger, ready with a white robe. (Take note, David.)

Upon reflection, Bishop David admitted that she'd actually gotten the whole idea just perfectly - if unexpectedly.

She had come to Jesus, to baptism, fully, completely, innocently, without pretense. Without clothes before God (and, in this case, a bishop, the cathedral choir, a half dozen vergers and deacons, and an entire Easter Vigil congregation). Symbolic innocence, symbolic emptying of self -- ready to put on the wedding robe that is Christ Jesus.

It seems to me that the under-dressed wedding guest was there for show. For the banquet, for dancing, for good champagne, for a *party* – but perhaps the king saw that his guest hadn't made a firm commitment to be part of the community.

Sometimes, of course, we dress just *wrong* totally by accident. Everyone you talked to said, "Oh, I'm just wearing blue jeans," but they changed their minds at the last minute. Rats.

But this wedding guest, I think, was showing disrespect. A lack of understanding. A disregard of the *importance* of this particular banquet and an unwillingness to join in with conviction, sincerity, humility.

Remember that the group who finally attended the wedding banquet were streetpeople, good and bad. That's the grace of this invitation. We are *all* invited – we are *all* streetpeople, good and bad.

Jesus Christ invites us to the banquet as we are. The man who failed to put on the wedding robe accepted the identity of Jesus, yet he failed to put on the practice of a Christian life. He failed to hear the words of Christ to love, to serve, and to follow. He accepted the invitation tentatively: "I'll come and eat and make merry, but don't expect me to really believe that this is important."

And so he was thrown out – and there was weeping and gnashing of teeth – *mourning* that his soul had been lost.

When we commit to baptism – or, more fully, to confirmation or reception or reaffirmation of vows – when we commit, we are putting on the wedding robe of Christ. We say "yes" to the invitation and all that it means. We pledge to honor the dignity of one another, to care for the poor, to feed the hungry, and to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength.

This isn't a wishy-washy commitment. It's not like saying, "Sure, I'll meet you at Starbuck's." No, it's more like saying, "Let me prepare myself – I want to honor your presence in my life."

And that's what we're doing when we accept the invitation of Christ. We honor the presence of Jesus in our lives. We do it sincerely, with commitment, and with hope.

And we do it with thanksgiving.

The invitations to the wedding banquet have all gone out. Every one of us has received one.

Now. What to wear?

I remember a time not too long ago when men dressed in jackets and ties, women in smart suits or sweater sets to take an airplane flight. It was something special, and they dressed for the occasion. If you've watched the newest TV series "PanAm" you'll see what I mean. Even

the children are dressed up! As a travel agent flying on a free stand-by airline ticket we had a dress code – jacket and tie, no bluejeans, shoes, not sneakers, certainly not sandals. We were told that we had to help maintain the image that flying was special, a privilege. Nowadays, of course, you'll see people in all manner of dress, down to basketball shorts, tee shirt, and flip-flops. It's truly discouraging how times have changed.

And yet – is this downshift of sartorial correctness also a sign that flying has become less of a privilege and more of an everyday thing? Not unlike just taking the bus across town? People don't make a big deal of it – it's how we get from Point A to Point B. Flying across the country has been opened up to those *less* privileged, or, as the Wall Street Occupiers would say, “the other 99%” of us.

I suspect that's the point of the wedding invitation. It was opened up to the other 99%. *All* were invited, *all* were welcome. Something like the invitation and welcome we try to extend here at St. John's.

Remember that the Episcopal Church was once called “The Frozen Chosen.” Another moniker was “The Republican Party at Prayer.” They both sound pretty exclusive. Unwelcoming. Not open to “that” sort of people.

Fortunately, times have changed. As the Episcopal Church began to heed our baptismal vows we have done our best to open up. To welcome “that” sort of people. People of all ages, ethnicities, economic status, sexualities, people with a different sort of family, people who may not “get” what the Nicene Creed means but who, for whatever reason, have found a place that feels like home. There are certainly Episcopal churches where time and the people are frozen in place – St. John's, I am proud and happy to say, is not one of those Episcopal churches.

It *is* a privilege to be invited to the wedding feast. What to wear has become less important than how to serve. Yes, it's important to dress up – it implies a commitment, thought, preparation. But it's not the jacket and tie that's important, it is the showing up. The readiness to receive, to give thanks, and then to go into the world to be the hands and feet of Christ Jesus.

We are at the banquet. Are our hearts ready?

Amen.