

"DRESS IN STYLE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

I came across the following clipping about this time last year. Entitled "The Religious Life", it was taken from the monthly news letter of the Unitarian Church in Urbana, Illinois. You'll remember the Chicago Bears were in the Super Bowl on this Sunday last year.

"Flash...Flash...Flash. Change of Plans for Installation Service of New Pastor. Due to a scheduling conflict with the Superbowl, the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Urbana has changed the time for the Installation of Rev. William C. Saunders as Minister from 4:45 P. M. to 3:30 P. M., January 26, 1986.

Television consoles will be set up in the Education Wing of the Church. Kick-off is at 4:30. We invite you to join us for an afternoon of celebration - the Service of Installation, Reception following; the Superbowl, and dancing into the evening. Child care will be available.

Clergy: you are invited to robe and process. Please meet in the Board Room by 3:15."

Who was it who said, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em?" Was it Vince Lombardi? I know he once said that "winning isn't everything. It's the only thing!"

DEVELOPMENT

Before this day's over, there's going to be a lot of celebrating and let's hope it's here and not in Denver. I've been doing a lot of reading about the game and go into well prepared. It appears that the "Top Dogs" and the "Underdogs" are both relishing their roles. The Giants are "comfortable" and the Broncos are not fazed. There are some who feel (easter sportswriters mostly) that the Broncos really don't deserve to be in the Superbowl, that they haven't suffered enough, as the Giants have in the past twenty years. It's as if the Denver Broncos were guests at a banquet to which they shouldn't have been invited!

Which leads me to the text for today's sermon. It's from the Gospel of Matthew, the 22nd chapter, the parable of the wedding feast. There are two kinds of people in this parable. There are those who should have been at the banquet and weren't; and there are those who are at the banquet and shouldn't have been there.

THE PARABLE

The parable is addressed to Pharisees. The verse preceding the parable states it explicitly. "The Pharisees heard his parables and perceived that they were speaking about them." He's addressing the Pharisees. Pharisaism is not something that was limited to Jews in the first century; Pharisaism is an affliction distributed widely among human nature and, I have noticed, especially among Christians.

What causes Pharisaism, Jesus says, is poor vision - the inability to see what God has done in this world, the inability to see that the Kingdom of God is here right now. That's what the Pharisees struggled with. They couldn't see it. They didn't understand. Jesus said if the Kingdom of God is here right now, then we ought to show it by living grateful, joyful and appreciative lives.

And to bring that home, Jesus tells another parable that Matthew tags on the end of the parable of the marriage feast. It's a brief parable, and Matthew is the only one who includes it. It makes the point that if you believe the Messiah has come, if you believe that Jesus is who He said He was, then you'd better look like it. Your life had better be a life of celebration.

That little parable goes like this:

"When the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth!'"

That's clear enough. If you believe the Messias has come then the appropriate dress is joy and celebration. Your life, dear friend, ought to show that.

But this is also a judgment parable. The king returns to see who has accepted the invitation, finds somebody there who seems to have missed the whole point. He's there, but he's not celebrating. Like an old grouch dragged to the party by his wife, and whose expression and demeanor throughout the party lets everybody know he doesn't want to be there. "How did you get in here?" the king asks. If you are going to persist in seeing that life is a burden to you, then you might as well go to hell, because that's where people weep and gnash their teeth.

Jesus is saying Christians ought to dress in style according to the times. The time of the Kingdom is here. Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Kingdom is here. They believe God's grace is greater than any circumstance in our life. They believe, in the words of St. Paul, "We are more than conquerors through him who loves us", so why don't they look like it? Why don't they show it? Nietzsche said once, "The Christians ought to look more redeemed."

ILLUSTRATION / PARABLE

Clarence Forsburg, the preacher at the Missouri Methodist Church in Columbia, Missouri, on the campus of the University, said there was a woman treated at the University Medical Center about two years ago who couldn't smile. In fact, she hadn't smiled in eighteen years, not because she didn't want to, but because she couldn't. She was a victim of a rare congenital disease called "Moebius Syndrome". It paralyzes the facial nerves so the person literally cannot smile. The plastic surgeons at the medical center performed surgery on her and made it so that she had facial mobility again and she could smile.

Now that's a parable. A preacher can't resist something like that. There are a lot of people in this world who cannot smile, not because of "Moebius Syndrome", but because of myopia. That's the diagnosis of the New Testament. Not because there is something wrong with their facial muscles but because there is something wrong with their vision. They just cannot see what God has done in this world in sending Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus is always curing people of blindness. Because He wants us to see. He wants us to see what we have received.

The Pharisees are those who think that life is something that they have to earn. Or that life is filled with obligations they must perform. Or life is a

sentence that they must endure. Jesus came to show us that life is a banquet that you can celebrate! That deserves an "Amen". Let's hear it.

Now there are some people who resent that. They are apt to be the ones who see life as an obligation. They are the Pharisees. In Luke's version of this parable he says they are people who always have something important to do, some obligation, some duty. Some excuse is always given why they cannot come to the banquet. They are those who believe that as long as they have some responsibility, some obligation they must do, they can't celebrate. Maybe later, when I get all these things taken care of, but not now.

There are others who believe the Kingdom is not here, not because there are still duties that they have to fulfill, but because there is sorrow and disappointment that they still have to bear. And I am much more sensitive to them. How can someone who has suffered so much in this life look upon their life as a banquet? How can they do that? How can they rejoice when life has been so cruel to them. I understand that.

Some of you are familiar with the book, The Road Less Traveled. Remember that first chapter and that one little sentence in the opening pages that says, "Life is difficult". It's a simple, declarative statement. It's not qualified in any way. It doesn't say life is difficult for some people; it doesn't say life is difficult some of the time; it says life is difficult. Period. And Christians are not exempted from that. In fact, Christians are told not only to bear their own burdens; they are told to bear the burdens of other people. How can you live a joyful life doing that. It's tough. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said,

"I might have entered the ministry if so many clergymen I know hadn't looked like undertakers..."

Life is difficult and many of us go about without that sense of joy in our lives, leading, as Thoreau once put it, "lives of quiet desperation". Jesus tells us that life is a banquet that you can celebrate. How?

The secret, the New Testament says, is in seeing. Seeing that God has sent His son into the world. The parable says it's like a king holding a marriage feast for his son. The purpose for sending Jesus into the world was to get us to celebrate the life that we have received. And even when the Son is killed that purpose is not thwarted, because He is resurrected. And then the real celebration begins. Then we see nothing can stop God's purpose for our lives now. I tell you, if you can see that, then you can see that anything can happen in your life. If you can see that, then you can see that the ground of this world is gracious, alive, forgiving - so anything is possible - yes, even resurrection. Not Jesus' - but yours. And not just at the end of your life, but right now.

So live that way. Live expecting a resurrection. Live, as Paul put it, as if nothing "can separate you from the love of God that you saw in Christ Jesus". "Rejoice in all things" he tells his churches over and over again. Not because all things are good. They're not. A lot of things are bad, evil and hurt. But rejoice in all things because life is not in the grasp of some fate, but life is in the hands of a loving Father. Celebrate.

LET'S REMEMBER...

Now, let's remember, that those who believed that did not change the world. The world remained the same. They changed. That's the difference. The difference was they saw things differently. Jesus opened their eyes. They saw now that good can come out of anything. All they had to do was to live in expectation that good can come out of anything. Dress for a banquet. That's the way he put it. Expect that no matter what happens, whether we win or we lose, we're going to have a celebration. As one of the Denver Broncos put it, "Win or lose...we're just happy to be here!"

I like that old story of the woman in the country church who stood up at prayer meeting and said, "I want to tell this blessed community that I have rheumatiz in my back and I have rheumatiz in my neck and I have rheumatiz in my arms and legs. But I have been upheld and strengthened by that beautiful verse in the Bible, 'Grin and bear it.'"

I would remind you that those on the guest list for the banquet were not on the "privileged" list. Those who celebrate the life that God has given them are not always those who avoid the pain and sufferings of life. In fact, it's been my experience that more who endure the sufferings of this world are able to celebrate its joy than those who have never known suffering. The point of this parable is that the invitation is sent to everyone, which means that the only condition for making your life a banquet is deciding to make it that way.

And for most of us, I admit, that will mean we're going to have to "grin and bear it". And for some of us it may mean we'll have to fake it, much the same way Peter Bohler counseled John Wesley. John Wesley told Peter Bohler "I cannot preach grace; I've never experienced it". Bohler said to Wesley, "Preach it until you do experience it". That doesn't mean being dishonest about your true feelings. One has to be honest about his or her true feelings. If you feel that life has been cruel to you then be honest about that. But don't let it dominate your life.

DON'T LET ONE FACT DOMINATE

That's the clue, that's the trap, that we let one fact about our life dominate and define who we are. The divorced or widowed are tempted to do that, to think that this one fact about my life is going to determine the rest of my life. And people who have done something that they're not proud of in their past fear now that that one fact about their life is defining who they are, and is going to determine the rest of their future. People who have some liability that they wish they didn't have, some physical characteristic they feel defines them, think that's all people see. That's who I am. That's the burden I have to bear. It's silly that one fact will dominate our lives. Don't let it.

And if we let it do it, we're saying "no" to the invitation to make our live a banquet. "Not me" we're saying. "Maybe that beautiful person over there. They deserve the invitation. Not me". Or we say, "You must have come to the wrong house. We've had a death here. This invitation couldn't be for us." Or, "You've got the wrong person. If you knew anything about me, if you really knew me, then you'd know this invitation is not for me. I've got nothing to celebrate".

CLOSING

I tell you, the parable is addressed to those people and it says you are not dressed for the occasion. You don't know what times it is. This is the time when you can celebrate the life that God has given you.

These people think that what has happened to them defines who they are. Jesus is saying, "what I have done for you defines who you are. You are a guest at my banquet."

So, brothers and sister, act like it. Start dancing. And if you haven't done it for awhile, then practice it. It'll feel awkward at first, but in time I believe it will change your whole outlook on life and you will see that there is more to life than what has happened to you, and you are more than you think you are. And you will find that whether you win or lose, there can be a celebration!

PRAYER For friends who care, for a faith that can sustain us in all times of life, for such as these, O God, Father and Mother of our spirits, we thank you. For the life you have given to each of us, we are deeply grateful. We have received so much, our Lord. Help us to be for others now even as Christ has been for us. And whether we win or lose in the skirmishes of life, help us to know we can always celebrate because of the joy and love that have come to us in Christ, our Lord. Amen