

This message addresses among other things “Are you appropriately dressed?” when you come to church. Of course it has nothing to do with clothing. It is about being a “Community of Spirit.” Based on Isaiah 25:6-9, Philippians 4:1-9, and Matthew 22:1-14, this was preached by Kate on October 15, 2017.

Late Wednesday afternoon, I put my phone in my pocket. All of a sudden I heard a voice. My phone had called Sarah Garbe right in the middle of House Church. I have no idea how it happened, I think they call it a “butt call.” She was pleased, thought I was calling in to give some help with the readings. Joel and I were on a few days of retreat, getting prepared for the busy seasons to come. I wasn’t looking at the readings. Once I did, I fully understood. That gospel is hard. I usually try to get Joel to preach on those! But the more I studied it, with the two other readings, I thought I **need** to preach on this. Why? Because we’ve received an invitation, all of us, and how we respond to it sets the course of our lives, our community, and perhaps even our world.

Let’s start with the gospel. It makes little sense unless you know its original context. Matthew wrote in the midst of tension between the Pharisees, scribes and elders of Judaism, who understood themselves as the ones initially called by God, or, in other words, the **first invited** to the banquet, and the Gentile Christians, the only recently invited. Those who see themselves as the “chosen people” are busy doing other things thinking their place is secure, enraging the king who has invited them to his son’s wedding banquet. Remember, this is a parable, a symbolic story, telling us that the anger on both sides is hot enough to incite violence. The king ultimately sends his slaves to go out and invite **everyone** to the banquet, good and bad, symbolizing the call of God to all people.

Now, the person who ultimately gets thrown out because he is not wearing a wedding robe confounds many a scholar, so don’t be surprised if it confounded you. We do not know if there was a particular wedding garment guests were supposed to wear. Some say it might be an allusion to the directive to “put on Christ” and those at the banquet would be expected to do so. I will have my own thought about this later.

Our responsive reading from Isaiah also involves a banquet to which all are invited. These verses show up in the middle of something referred to as Isaiah’s “Little Apocalypse.” God is preparing a rich feast for all people right in the midst of upheaval and ruthless times. As one commentator wrote: “God relishes reversals, unexpected and fresh.” In both of these readings, reversals are occurring on a macro level, in a long established religious tradition, one that has been first shaken by exile, and secondly shaken by a movement set in motion by Jesus that greatly **expanded** if not **dismantled** its borders. The previously chosen were feeling threatened.

The third reading also speaks of upheaval, but on a micro level. This particular church at Philippi is struggling a bit, but here it seems to be an issue of personalities, not of earth-shaking events. As you know, even in a strong faith community, personalities can clash, as they did early on with Paul and Peter. Here we have two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who have been strong workers for the gospel. But something has them out of sync with each other, and Paul wants the rest of the community to help them work it out.

Well, my friends, that **never** happens to us, does it? Two or more people out of sync and feuding? Well, of course it does! People often think that just because we are a church we are supposed to be in harmony at all times. Well, no. You don’t lose your idiosyncrasies or your ways of doing or seeing things when you become part of a church community. What you gain, however, is a common goal, a common desire to bring on the kingdom of God. And this is much **more important** than your differences. You also gain a community of people who are committed to healing broken relationship.

Okay, here’s the deal. We have all been invited to a banquet. God provides the invitation, God provides the rich food, the oxen and fatted calves (or the crab and lobster rolls), God even

provides the well-aged wines. God dearly wants us to come to this incredible feast. I believe there are **two parts** to accepting this invitation, both necessary to responding to God's initiative toward us. First, there must be a personal, a down deep in the soul, response to the goodness of God and this creation. The invitation comes in so many ways. All we need do is open ourselves to the miracle that present themselves to us every day. This is how the Spirit gets in. Every season has its offering of delights – mists rising over the waters, leaves astonishingly beautiful in their dying, the shape of gourds and pumpkins, the smell of wood smoke, the crunch of a crisp apple, the golden rays of twilight. I could go on and on, but receiving God's invitation to the banquet, to the kingdom, first involves taking the time and space to let our senses and souls receive these gifts.

The second part, equally important, and distinctively Christian, is to come together to take our place at the banquet where we form communities of spirit. Having been fed by creation, we now gather to feed others, to invite others in. This is the more demanding part, which is why we often refuse the invitation. We'd rather keep walking alone in the woods, on the beach, or working in the garden, finding God in beauty. I get it, but answering God's invitation requires something more of us. As I said earlier, Joel and I retreated for a few days where we read and wrote and drank in the silence. Oh, the Spirit was there! So achingly present in our solitude, in the smell of the woods and the call of the loon. But in the end, I kept hearing God saying "Okay, Kate, come to the banquet." I realized, you cannot banquet alone. You must gather with others, and work to become a brilliant community of Spirit that can touch and heal the wider world through **worship**, through **witness**, through **service**.

So here we are with all our idiosyncrasies, personalities and vulnerabilities, our ways of doing things and past experience! How in the world can it work? **Well, do we have our wedding robe on?** In other words, have we come dressed in the clothes of **joy** and **hope**, the clothes of Spirit? Or are we wearing our business suit of weary obligation? Are we here to take part in a loving banquet or merely observe the festivities? If so, you have not come properly

dressed. This is a celebration, a banquet of love. You can't just sit in the corner wishing you were somewhere else.

I must be honest. I have not always arrived in the spirit of the banquet. I am human. I have been anxious and defensive, sometimes angry and hurt. But today, today I am appropriately dressed, my soul is full of hope and excited about what we are doing together and what our future holds. I am happy that all of you are here, for we have some God-given work to do, some spirited celebration, some justice to uphold, some loving service to give, and we need one another to do it. We all have our invitation. Let's respond, no holds barred, with a whole hearted yes! Amen.

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