

Exodus 32: 1 - 14
Psalms 106: 1 - 6, 19 - 23
Year A, 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 4: 1 - 9
Matthew 22: 1 - 14
October 12, 2008

You Are What You Wear

I love my work. To use the appropriate theological terminology, I love my vocation or calling. I am so grateful that God's grace has helped me to find this wonderful community. I enjoy ministering, praying, teaching, preaching and sharing my time and life with you all. I can scarcely believe that I have been here almost a year and a half. So very much has happened in that time yet I still feel like I am getting to know so many of you. I feel so incredibly fortunate to be among you, week in and week out. Of course, I am still getting adjusted to certain parts of my life as a priest. Every job has its quirks. Perhaps the biggest oddity of my profession comes in getting dressed. Wearing a simple, white collar changes things. The way people speak to me, the jokes that are "appropriate", the openness on certain occasions, the fear in other moments, and even the confusion from some folks. The very first time I wore my new black shirt and white collar in Memphis, I went to TCBY to get some yogurt. I ordered, paid, and made friendly chit-chat with the check-out guy who promptly brought me back to earth with the comment, "What are you supposed to be?!" (talk about your ego-check!)

There are perks of wearing this outward sign of my call and ministry. If you ask anyone who has been in the hospital whom I have visited, you will know that wearing a clergy shirt makes you invisible. The signs on the doors may say, "two visitors only", but I do not count when wearing black. There may be areas of a hospital restricted to families, but almost universally

I am allowed to stay with patients until the very last moment. I appreciate this courtesy of willful blindness because it makes my ministry easier. Those moments with friends and families are not always the happiest but they can often be some of the holiest.

The collar can often be a target as well. People who do not understand the church, fear judgment, or simply wonder why I am present somewhere outside of the church's walls can react viscerally to a black shirt. Apologies verging on confession begin the conversation or aggressive, defensive questions shot like arrows, "Why are YOU here?" The saddest reaction I have ever had was in an Office Max. I was picking up exotic priestly items like highlighters, markers, and writing tablets. Two young children were playing in the aisles, running up and down, being kids. A mother came around the corner, looked at my collar and immediately pushed herself between me and the kids as a human shield. I can only imagine she had read too many horrible stories of sexual misconduct with clergy. She saw me as a predator and rushed her children to safety.

Then there are moments when my black shirt and collar serve as world-class advertising. On the superficial level, my attire insures that I will say a blessing before almost every meal and a prayer before almost any meeting or gathering. Wearing a collar has led to invitations to all sorts of places of life and loss and grace. I was visiting a hospital for a day-surgery, one of those quick procedures where the patients leave by early afternoon. As I was walking through the corridors, a woman smiled and then stopped me with the basic question, "Are you a priest?" With my affirmation, she quickly asked me if I could come and visit her father. The specifics of his illness escape me. What I quickly learned was that he had been estranged from his church for a long time. I don't know if he didn't feel welcomed or

if he didn't want to go. Something had happened some time ago in his life that had separated him from his community and quite possibly his faith. The hour I spent at that bedside, listening, talking, and praying were filled with grace and joy. I don't know what happened to him after that visit. I just know that my shirt and collar provided an invitation for the woman to ask me for help.

In our gospel today, Jesus tells a parable about a good king who sends out a great many invitations for the wedding feast of his son where attire has a similar meaning. We do not have to think hard about who this king is or who his son might be. We should be flabbergasted at the response. Those invited not only reject the invitation to a banquet, but they actually beat and in some cases kill the messengers. The good king becomes incensed at this reaction and wages a war against the most inhospitable people imaginable. A first century Christian would hear this story and think of Israel, their rejection of God, the Messiah, and the messianic banquet, and see Rome's destruction of the Temple as a fulfillment of this parable. The good king would then send out more messengers and invite everyone and anyone: rich and poor, old and young, women and men, Greek and Roman and Egyptian, and even both good and bad. Everyone is invited to this great feast. If the parable just ended here, we would have a feel good story. Only the last four verses create great consternation among scholars and teachers.

The wedding hall is filled with guests and celebration. The king walks among those willing to be present. The good king notices that one man is not wearing a wedding robe and asks, "Friend, how did you get in here not wearing a wedding robe?" The man has no response. We do not know if he didn't have time or if he didn't want to wear the robe or if he even knew he needed to have one. He is simply silent. The absence of a

robe speaks volumes for him to the King. He orders the man bound, hand and foot, and thrown into the outer darkness where, in perfect form for Matthew, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Suddenly, our happy celebration of the Messianic banquet has a terrible ending! Theologians and scholars struggle with exactly what this means. Since everything else is metaphorical, no one thinks we are talking about a literal robe. Instead, Dean Sam Wells of Duke University notes, “Augustine saw it as love; Luther unsurprisingly derided those who saw it as anything other than faith; Calvin tweaked it to mean both faith and works.”¹ Those same first century Christians who were riding high with God’s destruction of the Temple and invitation to everyone else now shudder with concern and dread. For them, the robe is as obvious a reference as a king and his son or even a black shirt and a white collar. Once upon a time, baptism involved removing all the clothing of your past life in order to be fully submerged. As you rose up into a new life as a Christian, you were dressed in a white robe symbolizing your new calling, your new life, your new ministry. This man’s lack of a robe could mean that he was not baptized or, worse still, that he chose not to live into his baptismal promises. Either way, Jesus is reminding those early Christians that God’s invitation comes with a judgment for them as well.

The wedding banquet robe is our baptismal robe. For many of you that original robe was more like a lacy, hand-stitched christening gown but the parallel remains the same. Each of us wears a garment that identifies us as a Christian as surely as a black shirt and a white collar. God invites all of us to the wedding feast, to share in the abundance and revelry and joy of the community of faithful. Our job is to realize that we are daily putting on that robe. Whether we are talking about Augustine’s love, Luther’s faith or

¹ Wells, Sam. “Living by the Word.” *Christian Century* (October 7, 2008; p 20)

Calvin's faith and works, we must realize that each day we go out into the world wearing a baptismal robe. Some of us will wear this robe and move invisibly among us: caring for others, sharing their faith, asking for no reward and seeking to comfort and love. Some of us will wear this robe and live as a target: absorbing the pains and anguish of this life, listening to the anger and hurt churches have caused, and even sharing in Christ's pain as people reject, revile and rebuke them. Some of us will wear this robe and stand as tall as a billboard: proclaiming the good news with words and action, carefully pointing to the God inviting everyone to come to the banquet, and sharing God's call to bring all together in love and celebration. We all wear a baptismal robe designed for a messianic feast. The key is to remember that even if it is not as visible as a black shirt and a white collar- God wants us to wear that robe in a world that needs to see each of us wearing it, one way or another.

Amen.