I love good gear.

I went to my first Hearts of Pine game this summer and even though it was my *first* game, I showed up with a Hearts of Pine hat, shirt, and scarf – I had the gear

I thought I'd try to ride my bike to my internship site when I was in seminary and after the first ride I decided I was a cyclist and bought the padded cycling shorts, tight shirts, and reflective vest – I had the gear

I became a priest – I've got the collar, the alb, the stole – I've got the gear

I love good gear, it affects how I show up

And, it seems, that it really matters to Jesus how we show up – which is my complicated take away from this morning's complicated parable

It's a very complicated parable, isn't it?

And the interpretation of this parable is even more complicated by the fact that it has historically been read as an allegory for the experience of the Jewish Christians Matthew was writing to and so it seems to have a very specific meaning rather than a more universal meaning

In this allegorical reading of this text, the King is God, the wedding banquet is the heavenly banquet, those first invited are the Jewish people who ignored the invitation and then ultimately killed the prophets (like John the baptist), and the "everyone you find" who are ultimately invited is symbolic of the Jewish Christians and the universal invitation to the gentiles to be welcomed to God's table

Ultimately, this kind of reading makes Matthew's early Jewish Christians feel much better about themselves and similarly gentile Christians throughout the centuries hear this as affirming their place in God's mansion

And, once you hear this interpretation, it's hard to hear it any other way

However, you can imagine how slippery a slope this interpretation is to supercessionist anti-semitism – "they got it wrong, we get it right" – kind of thinking

Maybe this interpretation was helpful to Matthew's early community, but we must be so careful to remind ourselves that this is indeed a parable – a version of which is also found in the gospel of Luke – and so, it's not meant to have *such a* specific a meaning

Parables do not equal reality, they do not warranty literal readings or allegorical ones either

Is the King in this parable meant to represent God? Maybe he's meant to show some likeness to God, but our God isn't a moody, violent King so it's not a perfect fit

And yet, the imagery of the King changing his plans and inviting everyone to the wedding holds a lot of appeal to me and my belief that God shows no partiality or judgement to people based on their gender identity or expression, their sexual orientation, their race, their ability, their socioeconomic or political status – all are welcome at God's banquet

I like that part

But I don't love then that one of those who are welcomed in is then thrown out for not wearing the right clothes

This is the holy struggle with Jesus' parables

Is there still wisdom to be gleaned even with a complicated parable like this? yes – and this parable is one we have to struggle with, or as I have preached before: sit in the ick

Professor Cody Sanders, in his podcast on this text, also suggests sitting in the discomfort of this parable, in particular, he said we might sit with our discomfort at the anger shown by the King and how we might be uncomfortable thinking that God could be so angry and behave so harshly[1]

For Professor Sanders, sitting with that discomfort led to a wondering: is it possible that Jesus gives us such a bold parable because he really actually cares a lot about the truths he is trying to express?

Maybe Jesus just really, really cares

for instance, this wedding guest that gets sent away – it's hard for me to imagine that God, excuse me…the King…would extend an invitation to everyone on the streets and then *judge* someone for what they were wearing….to a wedding they didn't know they were going to

OK, that's me sitting in the literal text, but with Professor Sanders lens: what if Jesus really cares?

What if Jesus really cares how we show up and respond to God's invitation?

What if Jesus really believes that how we respond to God's invitation is just as important as recognizing that all are invited in the first place?

One of the commentaries I read for this week quoted the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth who wrote in response to this parable: "it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all."[2]

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[1] https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/1106-twentieth-sunday-after-pentecost-october-11-2026

[2] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-7

One who doesn't obey and come accordingly declines and spurns the invitation no less than those unwilling to obey and appear at all

How we respond and show up to the invitation is as important as the fact that we're invited!

Barth leans into the imagery of the parable in a way that is both helpful and kind of not, but like Professor Sanders it leans into an understanding that we can't just throw away this part of a parable because it makes us uncomfortable but perhaps precisely because it's uncomfortable we should spend time with it and ponder what it's asking of us?

How do we show up to God's invitation – God's invitation to grace, to love, to joy, to justice?

How do we show up to God's invitation to care for our neighbors?

How do we show up to God's invitation to care for God's living creation – the more than human world?

I mentioned at the head of this sermon that I love good gear – I love good gear because it helps me feel equipped to show up with my fullest in the moment

I lift my Hearts of Pine scarf high to show my love of the sport and my support of the team

I wore those padded shorts and tight shirts and reflective vest to show I took cycling and my safety seriously

I wear this collar, alb, and stole to remind myself of my role in this community and the yoke that I have taken on with that role

What's the "wedding robe" that God is asking us to put on – the gear – to show that we take seriously how we show up to God's radically loving invitation?

Sam Wells, author and Vicar at St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, writes that "the wedding garment has proved troubling to every generation of interpreters. 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."[3]

Sam Wells himself thinks it can only be one thing: the baptismal robe

"Baptism is the definitive moment when Christians say, 'I am allowing myself to be made different by the difference made by Christ'" which he compares to "Gandhi's much-quoted expression 'Be the difference you want to see in the world.'"

Love, faith, good works – Sam is kind of right that they're summed up in our baptismal covenant and so perhaps thinking of wearing the "gear" of our baptismal identity – that's what prepares us to show up to God's invitation properly attired

I can't fathom a God who would kick me or you out of anywhere for not being properly attired, but I can wrap my head around the idea that Jesus cares *a lot* about how we show up to God's invitation

And, I want God to know how seriously I take the ministry I've been invited into in my baptism – Jesus' ministry of healing, love, restoration, justice, kindness

What's the "gear" you can put on to show God that you, too, take seriously this incredible invitation you've received

[3] https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-10/remade

It matters, to Jesus, how we show up.

Amen.