

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## CLOTHED BY GRACE Galatians 3:23-29

In our little corner of the planet, June is the month in which we celebrate our flag, our fathers, the longest period of daylight in a day, the beginning of the summer season, high school graduations, the end of the public school year, as well as more recently the NBA and Stanley Cup playoffs. But for all that, and even in the face of Father's Day, the month of June is still primarily known as the month of weddings. The "June Bride" is still the cultural icon of the young, the pure and the beautiful, resplendently adorned in her white wedding gown, with veil and train.

It just does not seem to be a wedding without, at least, the bride wearing something special. I remember seeing a picture of a couple back in the 70's getting married on some mountain top. Everyone in the picture was in his or her climbing gear, but the bride had pulled a veil out of her pack and was wearing it for the ceremony. Just this past Memorial Day weekend, Scottie and I spent two days at Virginia Beach. One evening as the sun was setting, chairs were set up on the beach, guests began to arrive, and then girls in identical dresses and guys in kacki suits (all barefoot) arrived. Shortly thereafter came the bride in a traditional white wedding dress complete with veil and a long train. My first thought was, "Boy is she ever overdressed for the beach!" But that was quickly followed by my feelings of being so under dressed, or perhaps, undressed in my bathing suit. But then again I was not invited to the wedding.

I could not help but be reminded of the parable of the wedding feast told by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (22:2-14).

*<sup>2</sup>"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come..."*

*<sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

*<sup>11</sup>"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup>and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"*

There on the beach that evening, were two sets of people. Those who were dressed for the wedding participated in the joyous celebration of the wedding, while the rest of us in our various conditions of undress could only ogle from a distance.

And then my mind jumped to the wonderful opening scene of the eternal bliss, which is the consummation of the restoration of a perfect relationship with God, that is found in the Book of Revelation (21:1-3).

*<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them...”*

The New Jerusalem, the Church, the People of God, is the Bride of Christ in the great wedding feast of the Lamb at the end of time and the beginning of the time when there is no time. But again we have the imagery of proper wedding apparel – the bride is prepared by being adorned properly.

The future bride may have been proposed to in the most casual of circumstances. And the wedding guests certainly receive their invitations in whatever condition they might have been at the moment. However, a proper wedding guest and a proper bride dress appropriately for the wedding. Like the bride and the wedding guests, Jesus calls as we are – spiritual beggars naked in the streets, the beloved in her daily routine. But he calls us to the wedding – his wedding, and we are called as his bride. How will we be recognized as participants in the wedding and not be relegated to “ogler status” from a distance? The difference will be in what we wear.

St. Paul tells us that God has given to us who would not be naked two outfits. One is the Law and the other is Christ. He describes the Law as a gift from God, but as a garment of confinement. It is like a straight jacket which is placed on an individual who is out of control so that he might be subdued and unable to hurt himself or others. It is a grace because it is a protection. It is a grace because it breaks the violence and calms the chaos so that he might be able to hear God. But a straight jacket is not a wedding garment. No wedding, other than a slapstick spoof, would want someone to attend in a straight jacket.

The key to unlocking the straight jacket of the Law is faith in Jesus Christ. It is the internal cure through which we are freed from the external constraints of the Law by being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. As St. Paul says elsewhere:

*<sup>14</sup>For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. <sup>15</sup>And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

*<sup>16</sup>From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself*

*through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... (2 Corinthians 5:14-18).*

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.* Through faith in Jesus we are changed from the inside out. We are not confined from the outside as by the Law or like newly whitewashed sepulchers, but we are made new from the inside out through the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit.

The outward symbol of our new faith is the sacrament of baptism. When we are baptized our recreation or rebirth is symbolized by our immersion in and being raised from the water. It is through a life of baptism that we “put on” Christ. As we intentionally die daily to self and live in increasing obedience to God, we become more and more Christ-like – that is increasingly clothed by Christ.

On the side of “it’s-good-news-because-the-bad-news-is-so-bad,” we often use the imagery of being clothed with Jesus to say that at the Judgment, if God looks at me and sees Chuck Alley, I am justly condemned. But if he looks at me and sees Jesus, I am saved by his grace and mercy. Today we see this same truth from the perspective of love and joy. If I cloth myself with the wedding garment of Jesus Christ, I will participate in the wedding of the Lamb and enjoy God’s joy for ever.

The invitations to the wedding have been sent. What are you waiting for?

Let us pray.

Blessed Father, you have given us your Son as both the Bridegroom and our proper wedding apparel. Help us to move from our spiritual wildness, through the confinement of the Law and into blessed state of participation in the wedding of the Lamb. Let us not forsake your grace by ignoring your provision. May through each day of our lives we become more and more the proper image of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on June 20, 2010, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7).*