

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
October 9, 2005

RISING TO THE OCCASION

“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” ~Matt. 22:12

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” ~Phil. 4:8

The Emperor, who was a very vain man, had a suit of new clothes. They had been made for him by two weavers who told him the clothes were not only the most wonderful colors and patterns, but would be invisible to anyone who was not fit for the office they held, or who was a fool. The Emperor thought that was a great idea: he would be able to find out which people he should dismiss, and sort the wise from the fools. He had wanted to see the cloth in the making, but was just a little nervous that he might see nothing at all on the loom, so he sent the first one, then another, of his ministers. Each was appalled when he saw nothing there, but he realized he could not say so. Each claimed the cloth to be beautiful, charming. When finally the Emperor was dressed in his new clothes, including an invisible train, all his courtiers exclaimed over the design and the colors. Out into the streets he went, under a gorgeous canopy, and all the people said how beautiful the Emperor’s new clothes were. They did not want to be thought fools, or unfit for their posts. Until: “But he has got nothing on,” a small child said. “Listen, a child says he has nothing on.” And at last: “But he has nothing on,” all the people cried.

Hans Christian Andersen’s story ends: “The Emperor writhed for he knew it was true, but he thought ‘the procession must go on now,’ so he held himself stiffer than ever, and the chamberlains held up the invisible train.”

The story of the Emperor’s new clothes throws an uncomfortable light on numerous possibilities. And this morning, I have confidence that among this gathering we are capable of applying the story both imaginatively and realistically.

As for me, a Christian priest, pastor, and prophet among you, I have the same opportunity and challenge, no other alternative but to rise to the occasion as well. That is to say that first, this story of the Emperor’s new clothes throws an uncomfortable light on that which I embrace, and simultaneously am called to critique: the state of Christian belief and practice. Second, it also sheds particular light on my observations as a citizen, but more on that later.

The ways that were found, 2,000 years ago, to express how belief in God was opened up and illuminated by the existence of Jesus of Nazareth were the ways of that time. They were products of 1st century thinking, colored by 1st century ideas about the world. Many of these ideas are still valid today and many are not. Like the courtiers and the subjects of the Emperor, we do not like to say so; in some cases we do not even like to allow ourselves to think so. Yet problems or questions of specific belief will not go away, some of which is welcomed enthusiastically, while otherwise met with outrage. And though the outrage is understandable, for it is a fearful thing to feel that religious foundations beneath you are crumbling, I and many others am of the mind that we are living in a watershed time in terms of institutional, organized Christian religion. While it

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is apparent that the Christian communities that are growing exponentially in this new millennium tend toward fundamentalism, it is clear to me that there is a translation, a practice of Christianity that is dying, because it is neither comfortably rigid nor creatively open. One could say that this demise is precisely because organizations, no matter how divinely inspired, are subject to losing their impact and relevance. "Everything begins in prayer and ends in politics," the French writer Charles Peguy said wryly.

Now spreading out in front of us is the future, with Christianity shrouded in mist. Is it here at all? If it is, is it recognizable? A drastic re-examination of our beliefs and practices is not usually popular of course with either the clergy or the faithful, but it is absolutely essential. It is not a question of abandoning, but it is a matter of re-interpreting and reassessing Christian belief in light of our holy texts and rituals. And it requires honesty. In other words, the days of "believe this because we tell you to" must end. However, as a Christian priest, pastor and prophet I am not willing to give in to the fact there cannot be a Christianity of the future to which even the exiles will be able to return. The choice, or the rising to the occasion in other words, is to bring on the reformation, the change, or stand by in pious inertia. What stands in the way of change seems on the surface to be theology, but I am convinced that more so what lies just below the surface is the real impediment: power. Ancient religion in both its Jewish and Gentile forms was concerned with power, and unfortunately, in many of its manifestations today Christianity, to be specific, remains unrepentantly a religion of power, and therefore on many levels, reluctant to change, and ultimately, seriously misusing and abusing its power. Nevertheless, power does not concede without a struggle, and we witness this on the political and communal levels, as well as in our personal struggles for transformation.

If we take for example, the illustration in the gospel of Matthew today of the parable of the wedding banquet, it is clearly and strikingly violent. How many people do you know who murder the postal worker for delivering a wedding invitation? And how likely is it that a wedding banquet would stay warm while a king mobilized his troops, declared war, and burned a whole city to the ground? And, though everyone found on the streets is welcomed, the one who dares to arrive without a wedding robe is bound and thrown into the outer darkness. Though these images are difficult to swallow, this is no ordinary story. It is an elaborate allegory, in which everything of course has a deeper meaning. There is no way to handle it without knowing the story behind it, which was Jesus' disappointment, and Matthew's after him, that so few of God's people were responding to the invitation to celebrate with God's son. In short, the underdressed wedding guest got bounced because being an invited guest does not mean you do as you please, or you simply show up because you have the privilege and power to do so. Whatever the guest's logic, he did not rise to the occasion. Instead he demeaned it by refusing to change. And I am not referring to clothes here. Like everything else in this story, the wedding robe has a deeper meaning. It is not a white linen tunic embroidered with gold thread. It is a whole way of life, imbued with characteristics like those that the letter to the Philippians illuminated today: *whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable*. The underdressed guest's mistake was not that he showed up in shorts, but that he showed up evidently short on qualities that the beloved people of God are expected to possess and thought no one would notice. While we know that this is a

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story that addressed a very particular situation in the life of the early church, despite what even the harshest critics, skeptics or disheartened Christians say, it still has something of value for us. And though this is not a wedding banquet here this morning, let's consider it one of many rehearsal dinners where each of us gets to practice our parts, however small or large they may be. Clearly, the rehearsal dinners are not only in houses of worship. Like it or not, they are also apparently in the halls of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the White House. And though you might not appreciate hearing this from a pulpit, there are some seriously underdressed guests in each and every one of those places.

Someone asked me recently in an interview how I felt about issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, poverty and war to name a few, being raised in the national debate over faith and politics. In other words, reading between the lines, I was asked: whatever happened to the separation of church and state? I could only respond by saying that like it or not, religion IS in the public square and its time for us to stop pretending that it is not or is somehow going to magically disappear from the political landscape any time soon.

Whether you've read it or not, agree or disagree with its conclusions, the likes of Jim Wallis' *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it* has been on the NY Times bestseller list for 15 weeks. Yes, it is a book on faith and politics, and Wallis' conversations over the last 21 weeks as he has toured the country has revealed to him that people of faith, and specifically Christian faith, feel that their voices are clearly not being heard in the debate over religion and politics. They were not necessarily coming to hear his voice, but to express their own passionately and emphatically. This is due says Wallis, to: "The heightened and continued role of religion and "moral values" in our political discourse, the reaction among a large number of people of faith to the Religious Right's hubris and pursuit of power, and perhaps most important, the essential moral and spiritual character of the most pressing issues our society confronts – the massive nature of global and domestic poverty, the crisis of the environment, the cost and consequences of war, and the selective moralities of both Left and Right in regard to the sanctity of life, the breakdown of both family and community."

It is clear that we do indeed face a moment of opportunity, of possibility, and must rise to the occasion, like it or not, both spiritually and politically. We can no longer afford to be reluctant to change on that domain. The Emperor with no clothes story has religious and political implications, and the truth is, some may not think (including religious AND political leaders) that it matters or that no one is looking. The procession goes on. Perhaps this is what the underdressed guest thought in thinking that the king was looking for warm bodies and he was happy to oblige. Happy to eat the glorious food and enjoy the fabulous music, delighted to be in such a position of privilege and power. And some of us, though not all of us, have rolled in here this morning without thinking much about it. Or at least wanting a little shelter from it. We show up with our own, myself included, spiritual shirrtails hanging out, lining up at the buffet table as if no one can see the ways in which we refuse to change, refuse to surrender our fears and resentments, refuse to share our wealth, refuse to respect the dignity of every human being, refuse to critique even our own faith and belief. Recall what it says in today's gospel: "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? The God of our life is

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not looking for warm bodies. The God of our life is looking for wedding guests who will rise to the occasion by honoring not only God, but also one another with whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable.

It is so hard to know what to do or when or how to respond, of this I am quite sure. There are so many troubling issues we face as a community, nation and globe. I've had people on campus say to me following the horrors of Katrina that they feel like they are wringing their hands, feeling so overwhelmed its paralyzing. I was reminded this week that this is not the first time many might feel this way. The worst outcome is that we do little or nothing at all. The revolutionary work of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* of 1776 said this: "***When my country, into which I had just set my foot, was set on fire about my ears, it was time to stir. It was time for every man to stir.***"

Allow me to conclude this morning by moving from the general to the specific and offer you a proverbial wedding invitation to join me, if you're not sure where to begin, to address what some are calling a rallying cry and new altar call: the issue of poverty. Some suggest that for the first time the world has the knowledge, technology and resources to end extreme poverty, but is lacking the political and moral will to do so. Jim Wallis and many others believe that generating such moral will is the vocation of the religious community. 19th century revivalist Charles Finney developed the idea of the altar call in order to sign up his converts for the abolition movement. Today, poverty is seen as the new slavery – imprisoning bodies, minds, and souls, destroying hope, and foreclosing the future for a generation. It is a complex societal issue, and the faculty leadership of the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford has organized a special course for students and community members called *Confronting Katrina: Race, Class and Disaster in American Society*. Beginning this Monday evening, it meets four times on campus, twice in October and twice in November from 7-9 pm. It is free of charge.

Through out the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures it is declared: *happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times*. It is up to us to join the many other religious voices in this nation who are rising up to the occasion to be more specific about what we mean by righteousness. We can do all of this in shorts or running shoes, suits or high heels because our wedding robes are not made of silk or cotton. They are made from the entire fabric of our lives, using patterns God has given us and expects of us – patterns of justice, forgiveness, humility, loving-kindness, peace. When we stitch them up and put them on we are gorgeous. We can no longer be reluctant to change. We can no longer be reticent or indifferent. We must no longer be stiff but nimble. We want to be ready whenever the invitation comes. Won't you join me?

Acknowledgments:

Saving Christianity: New Thinking for Old Beliefs; Hilary Wakeman; 2003
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The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor