The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung called them archetypal dreams. They are dreams we all have with similar storylines that grow out of our unconscious mind. They reveal what we don’t easily face in our waking moments.

For example, the legendary baseball player, Mickey Mantle, had a recurring dream that he was trying to get his uniform on and was staring at the game through a knothole in the outfield fence, unable to get on the field. Many of us have dreams of running across the college campus in a state of undress trying to reach a classroom to take a final exam. I have one where I am in my office bathroom at church listening to the congregation singing in the Sanctuary, knowing everyone is waiting for me to get to the pulpit, and I just can’t get suited up for the sermon.

What’s all that about? It seems to be something about our fear of failure, a feeling of unpreparedness, a sense that we are going to be found out and thrown out.

When I read this parable Jesus tells about the man at the wedding banquet who is found without a wedding robe and is thrown out into outer darkness, I wonder if that’s like a bad a dream that is telling us something we need to pay attention to in our waking moments. Moments like ... now?

But let’s not rush too fast to the conclusion. There’s lots of parable to attend to before we get there.

Matthew records Jesus telling a parable about the kingdom of heaven. This is one of a number of parables of judgment we have been looking at over the past few weeks. In the original setting, Jesus was being challenged by religious authorities about his wandering outside the fold of Israel to fraternize with Gentiles. He ate and drank with them—people considered by Jews as dirty, unclean.

The purity culture of Judaism was intended to remind Jews that they were a distinct people who should be holy as God is holy. All good. But it sometimes
had the shadow effect of closing them off to the profligate love of God for all people, including unholy humanity. Jesus’ understanding of holiness is less about keeping away from the wrong people than it is about keeping faith with God’s mission to all people. He calls his people to remember they are to be a light to the nations. But holiness is easier to maintain by segregation than integration.

So, he tells this parable of a wedding banquet thrown by a king for his son. A wedding banquet was a common image of the messianic age in which the union of God with the world would be an ongoing feast. Well, the king sends out invitations and finds that those who are invited as the likely guests are preoccupied with their own agendas of life and decline to come. Some go so far as to kill his servants, a clear allusion to the prophets whose message the people rejected time and again. The king is enraged and sends his troops to destroy their city.

But the king is intent on having his son’s wedding honored. So, he sends his servants out into the streets to invite all—that’s the key word—ALL. Everyone they can find is welcome. (Open to All; Closed to None. Always Open to All. Sound familiar, Wilshire?)

In its original setting, Jesus is chiding his own people for closing their hearts to sinners. He wants Gentiles as well as Jews to know the unconditional love and welcome of God. But Matthew’s Jesus is an equal opportunity offender, don’t you know?! By the time Matthew gets around to telling this story some 50 years after Jesus’ earthly ministry, something else is happening. The church that is now full of Gentiles may have begun to see itself as the true heir of God’s promises. Most Jews had rejected Jesus and the church thinks it has now superseded Israel as the true people of God.

This is a heresy we have to name. Jews have reasons not to believe Jesus is the messiah, even if we believe otherwise. To name just one, the prophets foretold that when the messiah comes and ushers in the messianic age, peace and justice will come at last. To look at the world as it is—including the fact that the church that declares Jesus is Lord has had such an influence on the world as it is,
it’s hard for them to see that this is so.

But the nonbelief of Jews in Jesus—not unbelief, nonbelief—doesn’t mean God is finished with them. Jews continue to hallow the name of God and hold out this universal vision for the world. When the church rejects Jews as the people of God and puts us in their place, we are guilty of presumption. We have not replaced Jews as God’s people; we have joined them to add our unique witness alongside theirs. We have no independent claim to truth that doesn’t depend upon our relationship to Israel. We bear witness to the one who both unites us and separates us—Jesus. He calls us all to join the party God is throwing for Every Body.

Here’s where it gets interesting in the parable. All these people who show up to the wedding banquet—they are the bad and the good alike. Gentiles as well as Jews. Looking closely at this we see an important principle involved in the gospel: *inclusion before exclusion*. Too often we think God has a limited guest list and we are lucky if God has put us on it. But that’s not the way this works. *Many are called, but few are chosen* doesn’t mean more than you think are eligible and fewer than that will make it in the end. It’s a way of saying that those who know themselves to be called have a great responsibility to answer that call by living up to it. Do you hear that, church?

Which is why we get this ending. The king notices that one is there without a wedding robe on. He is at the party, but by his dress he disrespects the king and dishonors the king’s son. He wants to be there, but on his own terms. He has shown up, but he hasn’t suited up. He’s on the team, so to speak, but he won’t get in the game. He wants all the benefits without the responsibilities that go with it.

When Matthew’s church heard the language of the wedding robe, they would have instinctively caught the allusion to baptism. When people were baptized into Christ in those early days, they walked naked into a river so that they were not distinguished as rich or poor, circumcised or uncircumcised. But when they came up from the water, they were given a robe to wear that signified their new life in Christ.
This parable must have been a terrifying warning to them. A warning that they not celebrate their inclusion and then turn around and refuse to join the joy of God’s inclusion of everyone else. A warning that they not take off their baptismal robe that signified living in the spirit of Christ and revert to their old ways of judging others.

The church in America today needs to hear this parable afresh. John Pavlovitz is a prophet calling on Christians to live up to our baptisms. He recently said this:  

*I’m tired of professed Christians preaching a Jesus that they seem to have no interest at all in emulating; of religious people being a loud, loveless noise in the world while claiming to speak for a God who is supposedly love . . . . I’m starting a new church—the Church of Not Being Horrible. Our mission statement is simply this: Don’t be horrible to people: Don’t treat them as less worthy of love, respect, dignity, joy, and opportunity than you are. Don’t create caricatures out of them based on their skin color, their religion, their sexual orientation, the amount of money they have, the circumstances they find themselves in. Don’t seek to take away things from them that you already enjoy in abundance: civil rights, clean water, education, marriage, access to healthcare. Don’t tell someone’s story for them about why they are poor, depressed, addicted, victimized, alone.*

That’s a start, I suppose. But it’s not enough to not be horrible. We are baptized into Christ. And as such, we are called to love and welcome and celebrate the good news of God that includes not just us but all whom God has called. And there’s that word again—ALL.

Wilshire, we have done what we can to declare in every way possible God’s love and welcome for all. And we have celebrated our inclusion. We have shown up for membership and all its privileges. But have we suited up for service, too?

The challenge of the ending to this parable is before us always. Being a Christian is not just about our identity as children of God. It’s also about whether we act like it. Whether we take up the mission of God once we have accepted our acceptance.

The church doesn’t run itself. It takes all of us putting on our robes, suiting up and going to
work. It takes saying yes to our duties to build a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. I know this time of COVID-19 restrictions has been challenging. But we all find ways to join in for the things that matter to us. And the church goes on, too.

Suit up and join in. Don’t presume upon your privilege. Or you might just find the Lord staring at you speechless, wondering why you are here if you will not participate in the grand and glad festivities. Amen.