

Dress Code

March 8, 2015

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

I read an article a few years ago about a man named Ralph Golio, a restaurant owner up in Massachusetts who decided he wanted to offer a free lunch. Ralph had had a pretty serious heart attack which he managed to survive and out of gratitude for being given another chance at life he made a deal with God that he would offer free lunches to any person over the age of 65. Free. No charge. Come in and have your choice of roast beef and mash potatoes or haddock with Creole sauce (not necessarily a heart happy diet – but hey, beggars can't be choosers). Ralph put his offer in the paper, placed signs in his windows – and was prepared for a line out the door. And much to his surprise nobody came. Almost nobody. A few folks who knew the wisdom of never turning down a free lunch came and tried it out – but for the most part what Ralph learned was that people thought there was a catch. No such thing as a free lunch. Must be a gimmick. No restaurant gives away food. Must be overstock he's trying to get rid of. But it's free, Ralph would insist. No, they said – there must be some kind of catch.

No such thing as a free lunch. We live in a world, don't we, of catches. We live in a world of gimmicks. Tricks to get you to sign on the dotted line. Pay more than it's worth. Bait and switch. "There's a sucker's born every minute," either said by P.T. Barnum – or about him. Who was it that said that when you put together the man with experience but no money with the man who has money but no experience – it's the man with the experience who gets the money and the man with the money who gets the experience. So we were taught long ago to be on the watch – any offer

that seems too good to be true is just that an offer too good to be true. You get only that which you pay for – just ask Ralph Golio.

So maybe Ralph Golio would be nodding his head if he were to hear Jesus' story about the king and his feast. The king has prepared a feast for his people – and he had made the invitation list and he is eager to eat, drink and be merry with his people – but maybe it's too good to be true. Maybe there's a catch. Maybe it's a gimmick. Can't be too good if you're not charging anything. So everybody has some sort of excuse to miss the feast. Maybe the word has gotten out on Facebook or Twitter that the right people don't seem to be going. The beautiful people won't be there. Better to go to one of those restaurants that require a second mortgage for portions one tenth the size of the plate. Lord knows the reasons – and the Lord is not happy.

The heck with them, he says. Let's open the gates and invite anyone who wants to come – the good and the bad – doesn't matter – I'm just interested in a party. I want people who want to be here. And so they come – those who are not too smart for their own good. People who know a bargain when they see it. And they come into this kingdom of the free lunch. And they eat, and they drink and they make merry. It's what the kingdom is, Jesus says. It's the free lunch. Pity those, Jesus says, who are just too smart for their own good. Those people who want to be in those circles that you have to earn yourself into. Have you ever been in one of those – those circles you have to earn yourself into? It happened long ago when we were young. You didn't have to get much beyond the first grade to find that there were those circles that you had to earn yourself into. The circle of the smart kids. Or the cool kids. Or the athletic kids. Or the rich kids. And maybe you spent a lot of time trying to earn yourself into one of those circles. Or maybe your parents spent a lot of time trying to get you to earn yourself into one of those circles. And maybe you'd do anything to earn yourself into one of those circles. Why you'd sell your soul to get into one of those circles. And some of us did.

Jr. High was my time. I was not particularly cool. I was not particularly smart. I was not particularly athletic. Oh but there was that group. That cool, smart, athletic group. And I worked so

hard to be something I really wasn't particularly. And guess what, I made it. I earned my way into the group and once I got there I realized two things – the group was not what I thought it was – they really weren't very nice people – and lo and behold I was turning into someone who was not very nice either. And of course it doesn't stop in childhood. The older we get the stakes get higher. Oh what we might do to get ourselves into the right group, the right club, the right organization, the right college, the right fraternity? What little parts of our soul we might sell to earn ourselves in?

C.S. Lewis writes about the Inner Ring – and that one of the great temptations we all face is the temptation to get ourselves into the Inner Ring. But there is so much we give away to get there. Writes Lewis, "Of all passions the passion for the Inner Ring is the most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things."

So the king says, join me for lunch. Join the group – the one you don't have to earn yourself into. The group of people who know a bargain when they see it.

I love that scene in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Jailbird*, where Walter Starbuck a man who has been imprisoned for a couple years for a Watergate crime is released – and he is left to stumble around wondering if he has any value ... any worth ... any chance of being accepted after what he has done. He makes his way over to a coffee-shop and this is how Vonnegut describes the scene:

By the time I reached the coffee-shop door ... my self-confidence had collapsed. Panic had taken its place. I believed I was the ugliest, dirtiest little old bum in Manhattan. If I went into the coffee shop, everybody would be nauseated. They would throw me out and tell me to go to the Bowery where I belonged. But I somehow found the courage to go in anyway – and imagine my surprise! It was as though I had died and gone to heaven! A waitress said to me, "Honeybunch, you sit right down, and I'll bring you your coffee right away." I hadn't said anything to her. So I sit down, and everywhere I looked I saw customers of every description being received with love. To the waitresses everybody was "honeybunch" and "darling" and "dear". It was like an emergency ward after a great catastrophe. It did not matter what race or class the victims belonged to. They were all

given the same miracle drug, which was coffee. The catastrophe in this case, of course, was that the sun had come up again.

I had the feeling that if Frankenstein's monster crashed into the coffee shop through a brick wall, all anybody would say to him was, "You sit down here, Lambchop, and I'll bring you your coffee right away."

Such is the feast of the kingdom. The feast for those who know a bargain when they see it.

But then there's a twist. Matthew gives us a twist we don't see in the other Gospels. The story is not over. A surprise is yet to come. For once the party has started for the good, the bad and the ugly – namely, you and me – once the party has gotten started -- the King looks around and notices that there is one who's not dressed right. He is not wearing the right outfit. There has been violation of the dress code. And much to our surprise the King's response is very harsh. The one who is not dressed right – is thrown out.

Whoa ... whoa ... we say. How can this be? Isn't this the kingdom of the free lunch? Isn't this the party for the good, the bad and the ugly? Now you're talking about a dress code? Excuse me? You see, I knew there'd be a catch. I knew it was too good to be true. Bait and switch. Fine print at the bottom of the page!!

Of course we might jump to this suspicion – we who have been taught to be on our guard. To look out for the catch, the gimmick. The come on. But maybe there's more to it than that. Maybe because it's Matthew's gospel -- Matthew's telling of the story – we might remember that there is a punch line soon coming. And the punch line comes in a couple more chapters when the King – this King who has just given the free lunch – Jesus tells us that the King will someday come with his angels to separate the sheep and the goats – and there will be in that moment the punch line, we will see what the king has been looking for – and what the King is looking for is for those who got the point. He's looking for those who got the point that they in fact got a free lunch, they were the good, the bad and the ugly – and that they've been given a meal they've never earned. And so struck by the

fact that they've been given a free feast – they get the point -- that the kingdom is not just about getting the free lunch, it's about the giving of the free lunch. To the least of these – the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the lonely – this is what the kingdom is about. The dress code is not what we might think – it's not the black tie, it's not the evening gown, it's not the Giorgio Armani, -- oh not you'd be out of place in such attire. No, the king is looking for servant's coats. He's looking for aprons. He's looking for rolled up sleeves. He's looking for dirty jeans. He's looking for those who see the joy of tasting the meal and then serving it.

It's what Jesus was trying to make so clear in that last feast. The one we read about in John. That while those disciples had spent so much of their time trying to figure out who was the greatest in the kingdom, who was going to sit at the right hand and left hand of the Savior – it's Jesus who stands up before them in that last meal and shows them what the kingdom is about. It's not just in the partaking, it's in the serving. So change of dress. Don the towel. He wraps a towel around his waist – and bends and washes the feet of the good, the bad and the ugly. Yes, there is a dress code for this meal. It's whatever you have to wear to make sure someone else gets the free meal.

It's what John Williams saw. John Williams, bus driver in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, driving his bus on one of those bone-chilling 10 degree Wisconsin days that we've all escaped from. He pulled up at the stop to let the next group of travelers on. One being a pregnant woman with tattered coat, torn socks and no shoes. No shoes. 10 degrees no shoes. John looked in the mirror to see where she sat and wondered what to do. He didn't have to wonder too long – for in his mirror he could see a young man -- young Frank Daily – 14 years old -- walk forward from the back of the bus in his bare feet with socks and shoes in hand and said, "Try these."

Towels around your waist, sockless, shoeless feet – it's the new rage. The new fashion.

Paul talked about it when he listed his list of fashion statements – said the apostle, "Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience – and above all put on love which binds every part of the outfit together."

Maybe that's what Charles Stoddard was seeing when he visited the legendary Molokai leper colony on the Molokai peninsula in Hawaii. Historic suspicions about leprosy and its contagion led 20 plus centuries of human civilization – from before the days of Jesus -- to treat lepers worse than animals and to banish them to remote places like Molokai to fend for themselves and to die on their own. A young Catholic priest, Father Damien, sensed the call to offer himself to the Molokai community to minister to the least of these. He put on his towel and took off his shoes and entered into the life of the least of these. Having received the free lunch, now it was time to serve it. Charles Stoddard, a writer, dared to visit the colony to see who this man was that would do such a thing. As he approached the makeshift chapel out he came, Father Damien. Stoddard writes: "His priest's cassock was worn and faded, his hair tumbled like a school-boy's; his hands stained and hardened by toil; but the glow of health was in his face, the buoyancy of youth in his manner; while his ringing laugh, his ready sympathy, and his inspiring magnetism told of one who in any sphere might do a noble work."

Who in any sphere might do a noble work. Any sphere? For what sphere and what person couldn't use a free lunch? The good, the bad, the ugly? You, me?

And what to wear? Oh what to wear to the feast of the king? Faded cassock, damp, dusty towel, shoeless feet. New attire for we who serve the feast.