
Same Pattern, Different Coat

**A Wedding Homily for Sydney McGrew & Dillon Smith
by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell**

It happened maybe a half a dozen times. We were in this room anticipating the rain that is changing the original plans to be in the beautiful garden outside. She didn't do it to reassure us. It's not clear she even made a conscious choice to say anything. She would pause after answering yet another question, a smile would come over her face, a light would fill her eyes, and Sydney would look around and say, "I'm so excited!" — as if she had forgotten to mention this before.

Dillon was here too. Standing by attentively in a very smart sport coat he recently had made. When I told him how much I liked it, his best man Bo reminded us that it looked a lot like his sport coat, which not so coincidentally, Dillon had borrowed for longer than Bo had anticipated. Same windowpane pattern, a similar cut, but noticeably different all the same. They each laughed at the implication in the knowing way old friends do.

I want to talk about both of those things tonight, because I think in important ways they're the same thing, and I think they tell us something true about why we are here doing what we're doing.

We tend to treat feeling — especially the big, embarrassing, can't-stop-talking-about-it kind — as a kind of weather that passes over the real event. The real event, we assume, is the vows. The promises that are spoken and the legal paper that is signed, witnessed and filed. The feeling is just the atmosphere around it — pleasant, maybe a little silly, but not where the truth lives. We say things like "don't get carried away" and "the feeling will fade as if emotion were just decoration on a structure built out of something sturdier.

I don't think that's quite right. I think sometimes a feeling that big isn't decorating the truth as much as it's making the truth visible. There's a kind of seeing that only happens when something moves you enough to see things differently. You know what I'm talking about. Remember that sunrise over the Shenandoah Valley, more country than you could take in at once. For one strange minute the world stops being a collection of separate things — ridgelines, fields, fog still sitting in the low places — and becomes, instead, one whole thing, and you're in it. The experience outruns the language available to it, which is precisely why we reach for ceremony and symbol rather than explanation. That kind of feeling isn't telling you a lie about the world. It's telling you something true that you usually walk past too fast to catch.

So, when Sydney can't stop saying she's excited, I don't hear someone who's lost her composure. I hear someone whose composure has, for a moment, gotten out of the way of something more accurate than composure usually allows. It's a little like the moment just before the sun clears the horizon. Two people are about to be woven into one life. Everything is about to change and you can feel it before you can name it. Her excitement may be the most honest reaction available.

Which brings me back to the coat.

A coat you borrow tells you something — how the shoulders should sit, how the sleeve should fall, what it might feel like to move through the world differently than you have. But a coat you borrow was not cut to fit your particular shape. Sooner or later, a tailor has to come in with a tape measure and start over: take your actual shoulders, your actual reach, the way your arms actually hang, and cut a new coat to those measurements alone. The pattern can stay the same. The coat cannot — it has to become yours specifically, or it was never going to fit. Same pattern. Different coat.

That is what I think love does, and what I think Dillon and Sydney have been doing this whole time without quite naming it. Nobody invents love from nothing. You borrow it — from your parents, from the couples you watched as kids, from every story and song that showed you a shape love might take. You try it on. You walk around in it for a while, not sure yet if it's yours. And then, if you're lucky, somebody takes that borrowed pattern and starts cutting it new — to fit not love-in-general, but this love, this particular shape, the two of you and nobody else.

That's why we read what we read tonight. "Love is patient, love is kind" is a pattern, not a finished coat. Paul is handing you the shape — the lines you cut along — but a pattern was never meant to be worn as it is. You still have to take it and cut it into your own cloth, your own particular marriage, the two of you and nobody else. The words don't change. What they become does.

So, Sydney and Dillon — don't let anyone tell you tonight's feeling is just nerves, just sugar, just a wedding doing what weddings do to people. Trust it. Let it teach you to keep noticing, on ordinary Tuesdays years from now, what is actually true and easy to miss: that you have been cut, the two of you, into one particular, irreplaceable shape, and that the coat you're putting on is not borrowed.

It was always meant for you and I must say, you look good in it!

Amen.