

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 2023
“Banquet of Grace” (Matthew 22:1-14)

Our gospel text for this morning is another one of Jesus’ great parables. In this parable he compares the kingdom of God to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. Those of us who have married off our children can certainly relate to this king. You want your child’s wedding day to be one of great joy and celebration – a celebration of the love the couple shares and a celebration of their union as husband and wife. And you want all your family and friends to be present to share it with you. You want to share your joy with others.

But it also takes a great amount of planning to make our kids weddings the wonderful celebrations they are. We have to secure a place for the reception, hire a caterer and choose the menu, line up a band or DJ, find a photographer, consult with a florist, make the guest list and send the invitations, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Planning a wedding is a labor of love. There is a lot of time, energy, hard work and money that goes into that one day. And you would really be disappointed if no one came to share this event with you.

This is exactly where the king in Jesus’ parable finds himself. As was the custom, he has sent out one invitation already. And now that everything has been prepared, he sends the slaves out to tell his invited guests that all is ready. It is time for them to come. But to his surprise, those invited refuse the invitation. We would think that the king would become angry and be done with them right then and there. Instead, the king is gracious and gives them a second chance.

He sends more servants out with a message. *I have made everything ready. The rack of lamb has been basted with sauces. The roast beef is slowly turning over a rotisserie. The wine bottles have been uncorked. Come to the wedding banquet for my son.* For all intents and purposes, the king begs his invited guests – those who had RSVP’d after the first invitation – to come to his feast and share in his joy. But they make light of the invitation and offer feeble excuses. According to Luke’s version of this parable, one had just bought a piece of land he needed to go see. Another had bought some oxen he needed to try out. And a third had just gotten married. They simply cannot come. Poor excuses, but excuses none the less. And their refusal to come shows the king what they really think about him. Then, to add insult to injury, some of the invited guests grab the king’s servants, mistreat them, and kill them.

Now the king is more than offended; he is furious. He sends his army to destroy his once-invited guests and burn their city. Then the king says to his servants: *The feast is ready, but those invited are not worthy. Still, we are going to have a wedding feast. Go into the streets and invite everyone you see.*

The servants follow his orders. They gather everyone they can – the good, the bad and the ugly – until the wedding hall is filled with guests. Let’s stop and explore what Jesus is saying in the first part of this parable. Even though he is speaking to a large crowd, the Jewish religious leaders, as usual, are the ones he really wants to hear.

The king in this parable obviously represents God. The wedding feast represents salvation – eternal life in heaven. It is the wedding feast of the Lamb of God (Jesus) and his bride, the

church. Those who had been invited but were unwilling to come are the Jews – the OT people. The king's servants are the prophets God sent to proclaim the good news of God's love and mercy. They invited the children of Israel to trust God and live in his goodness – both in this world and in the next. But they were unwilling to come. The pleasures of earthly life and the temptation of the nations around them were just more appealing. But God did not abandon them. He kept sending other servants – more prophets – to declare his intention to pay for their sin; his desire to redeem and rescue them. He invited them to turn to him and be faithful; in other words, to come to the banquet.

Some paid no attention and went on their way. Others began making the same excuses we make. *I just bought a beach house or a mountain cabin and I want to enjoy it. I just got a new car, or new truck, or camper and I've got to keep it running. It requires maintenance, you know. I just got married. We're both young, with new jobs. There's too much going on right now.* The excuses we offer today are almost identical to the ones given the king's servants. Still others didn't like what God's messengers were saying. They mistreated and killed God's prophets.

Finally, Jesus – the last and greatest prophet – came. He, himself, went straight to the people in the streets. He not only invited the “good” people – the religious types who went to synagogue – but the tax collectors and sinners, the prostitutes and thieves. Jesus invited everyone. Of course, they would even kill him.

The king's anger at having the people destroyed and their city burned is Matthew's reference to what happened a few years before writing his gospel. Around 70 AD, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Matthew is reminding his readers of the consequences of rejecting God's Word. By refusing to accept the invitation, the ones on the original guest list – God's covenant people – missed out on the immeasurable joy of daily experiencing God's love and forgiveness and walking in the light of Christ's love. They were deemed unworthy.

So the king sent out more servants. The last ones sent out represent the apostles. They went into the highways and byways and invited those who had not reason to hope for a place at the banquet of life. This is where we come in. The good, the bad and the ugly brought in at the last are the Gentiles – you and me. We, too, have been invited to the feast of salvation. So this is a parable about grace, about Christ reaching out to all of us and saying, *Come to the banquet.*

Now this parable should not offend us. We shouldn't feel like we're God's second choice; for from the very beginning it was God's intention to invite his whole creation to the feast. We only need to look at what Isaiah says in our first lesson. He speaks about a feast God will host where the shroud cast over *all* people will be removed and tears will be wiped from *all* faces. We must remember that Jesus' target audience here was the Jews – particularly the Jewish religious leaders. He was pointing out that God was in their midst and they refused to see him.

No, God's grace is extended to us all. Grace is the center of Christian faith. A man dies on a cross for a world that does not deserve it. A father runs down a driveway and welcomes home a wayward son. A silly sheep wanders off from the rest of the flock. Instead of waiting for it to find its way home, the shepherd leaves 99 and searches for it. A woman caught in adultery is

about to be stoned when a man intervenes. He tells her to repent of her sins and sends her on her way with no condemnation.

Friends, we are that wayward son. We are that silly sheep. We are that adulterous woman. We are the good, the bad and the ugly brought in off the highways and the byways. Jesus has died, taken away our sins, removed that which stood between us and God, and invited us into his feast. We are in the wedding hall now, awaiting the arrival of the groom who will come again in the clouds.

In the second part of the parable, Jesus tells us that the king goes to survey the wedding feast. As he looks across the banquet hall, he notices one who is not wearing a wedding garment. Now this man is easy to identify since everyone else is wearing the white garment customary for the wedding. The king approaches the man and asks, *Friend, how did you get in here without wearing a wedding robe?* The man is speechless. He doesn't know what to say. So the king orders him to be thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now, we're probably struck by the king's action. Why would such a gracious king do such a thing, especially after compelling the man to come to the feast? Why would he treat the poor man this way? Well, it's not as if the man doesn't have a wedding garment or that he is too poor to afford one. Keeping with the custom of the day, the host has provided his guests with the garments. All the man has to do is pick one up at the door as he enters. The king treats the man this way because, by not wearing the wedding clothes, the man is showing blatant disregard for the king – as well as disrespect for the king's concern for him. This man has taken the king's love and trampled it under foot.

If the first part of the parable is directed toward the religious leaders, the second part is directed toward the common people in Jesus' audience. He warns them – and us – that being invited is not enough. All the guests have been called to participate in the banquet, but in the end, some are not chosen to stay. And the one not chosen to stay is the one who was not prepared to participate.

You and I are prepared for the kingdom feast when we realize we are entering on God's terms and not on our own. We like to think we are the ones who determine what is right and wrong and proper for God, but we must remember that God is King and we are his subjects. God sets the criteria for entering his kingdom and it is up to us to fulfill that criteria. And what is the criteria?

It's very simple. We must wear the right clothes to the wedding banquet. Now that may seem foolish to us, but the point Jesus is making is that we can't come into the king's presence based on our own merits. That's what the man without the wedding garment tries to do. And when he is confronted by the king, he is speechless and cannot defend himself.

So, what is the right garment, the right piece of clothing? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us: *You are all children of God thru faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* You see, our coming before God is based solely upon Christ and what he did for us. The only garment we wear is the garment of righteousness which Christ gives us.

Paul tells us that in baptism we received a new set of clothes. It is a set of clothes we wear so that when God the Father looks at us, he does not see us with all our sins and imperfections. Instead, what God sees is his sinless Son standing in our place. When we are clothed in Christ, Christ wraps himself around us so that God the Father does not see us and judge us on who we are and what we do. Rather, he judges us based on the perfection of his sinless Son. In baptism, that perfection of Christ was given to you and me. Therefore, we can stand before our heavenly Father without fear or misgiving because Jesus is our Savior. He gave himself for us and now stands with us as our friend, Redeemer, Substitute.

In the parable, all of the guests come clothed similarly. They are all wearing garments stained and soiled by the dirt of the streets. They come wearing whatever they have on when they are invited. But those clothes are not good enough for being in the presence of the king. So all are given a new garment which has been washed clean and is suitable for such a joyous occasion. Likewise, none of us can stand before God on our own. We come to him stained with sin. We come with lives that can never be good enough. We come unprepared to enter the kingdom of heaven. But in Christ we are made ready. He has given us the garment of salvation. For in his death and resurrection, we find the forgiveness and perfection we need to stand before our heavenly Father.

Because of what Christ has done for us, we are most cordially invited. The banquet of grace is prepared. The robe of righteousness has been issued. So enter the joy of the king and enjoy the feast. Amen.