

The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
22 October, Anno Domini 2023
St. Matthew 22:1-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved in the Lord,

In today's appointed Gospel we hear Jesus speak the parable of the king and the wedding feast. And while the feast is filled with joy, the parable contains a very serious warning. Not everyone will be at the wedding feast. Not everyone is going to heaven. God is not a universalist. He doesn't force people into salvation. And more than that, perhaps even more to Jesus' point, not everyone in this life who bears the name "Christian" is going to heaven. That is shocking. That is painful to hear. But it is true. Some who are part of the outward fellowship of the church are really just curious like Herod or Felix who found Christianity interesting and wondered what He might be able to do for them. Others want nothing more from Christ than immediate relief from their current problems. Others like the idea of salvation or find the fellowship enjoyable or think it's a good idea but do not want to bear the cross that comes with it and so they stay at arms length, not wanting to sever ties with the world.

But this feast is a feast of mercy and life for sinners. If it isn't mercy you seek, then you won't have a seat at the table in heaven. And those who need mercy aren't in a position to dictate mercy's terms. This is not a you're-already-good-enough and everyone-come-in-your-own-way event. God makes the preparations. God decides what is on the menu and who will sit where. God issues the invitations. Everything is provided - allowable garments. It has to be that way because we don't have any of what is needed. And that is what we hate. That is why people aren't flooding into the Church. Our Old Adam is offended by the notion that we can't just walk into the kingdom of heaven as we are on our terms. We want to think the way we think and do what we want to do and we expect God to accept that. We want to think like the world about some things. We want to dabble in the world's wickedness as though it is just harmless fun. We treasure our pet sins. We treasure our wrong thinking and false doctrine because they are comfortable and easy and keep the world happy with us. And so we are shocked at the king's anger over those who refused the invitation. We are shocked when someone dares to tell us "You are not good. You are evil. Your thoughts are evil. Your wisdom is evil. Your deeds are evil." Just watch

what happens when a Christian is called to repentance (and by that I mean watch how your own flesh recoils when your sin is brought into the light). The one who once freely confessed “I am a poor, miserable sinner” suddenly becomes fiercely defensive of their goodness when the knife cuts too deep and strikes them specifically. Like Adam and Eve the excuses and justifications and deflections start flying. Sure adultery is wrong but its okay for me or my child to cohabit because money is tight but I’m not ready to get married. Of course murder is wrong but my anger is justified because that person’s opinions are stupid. God’s Word and the Holy Sacraments are very important but you can’t expect me to put them before EVERYTHING else. And notice that we don’t defend ourselves on the basis of God’s Word, because we can’t. We twist and bend and contort ourselves to try to slip around God’s Word. We try to brush it off as someone’s opinion or interpretation. Suddenly we are no longer poor, miserable sinners. We are unjustly attacked good people who deserve admiration and an apology.

But the only way to accept the invitation to God’s mercy is to admit that you shouldn’t be invited to the feast in the first place. It is to admit that you are a rogue, a vagrant, a rebel, a condemned sinner covered in the filth and stench of your own sin who shouldn’t be let within a thousand miles of God’s kingdom. You must confess that there is nothing good in you, that there is nothing of any redeeming value that caused you to receive the invitation. You must cease your preening and be emptied of any pride before God and man. “It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom God commends.” You must be deflated and humbled by God if you would be commended by him.

And those who will confess this reality (because it is the truth for all of us), not just in word, but in heart will hear the invitation to mercy and forgiveness as the most precious words they have ever heard. “Who, me? The King has invited me to sit at his table in His kingdom? Though I hated Him and sought to overthrow Him, though I have been a wretched and selfish steward, He has born the full cost of my redemption and now would call me “friend” and even “son”? There won’t be anything more important that needs to be tended to. Indeed, everything else becomes complete garbage in comparison. Nothing will not be sacrificed by the one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness because nothing but God’s mercy can satisfy - not wealth, not health, not wisdom, not popularity, not power, not family or friends. These are empty shadows that have nothing to offer. Jesus said “Whoever loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

And again, notice why some refused. They didn't simply fail to pay attention, they scoffed at the invitation as though it was beneath them. "I don't need that. Who does the king think I am? Who does He think He is?" They went back to their work, back to their earthly concerns, back to their own righteousness. The others took a more direct approach. They abused the king's messengers. They killed them as a warning to the King of what they would do to Him if He dared to show His own face. And when He did, when the King Himself came to beckon people to the feast, when the Lord Jesus descended from heaven and took on the form of a servant we spit on Him and beat Him and flogged Him and crucified Him and said that in doing so we were doing God a good service.

But He has been raised from the dead. The King lives! And what's more, He still wants us low-life wretches at His table. He is still inviting us. And while it is still called today, we would be wise to receive it. Who is so foolish as to despise this invitation to life from the One we cast off into death? Only such a person who will not repent, who doesn't want what God offers, namely forgiveness by the Blood of Christ. Such a person trusts in himself and treats others with contempt. Such a person doesn't let the knife of the Law cut too deeply it at all. Such a person finds mercy and forgiveness offensive because to need mercy is to be weak and helpless. It is to confess that all your wisdom and strength are actually foolishness and weakness and completely worthless and evil - all of it.

To reject this gracious invitation is to reject the King and that comes at a terrible price. One day the invitation will be removed and the only thing left for those who have refused the invitation will be destruction. Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise. Cain was driven from God's face. Moses was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. Israel and Judah were both overrun and carted off into exile. Jerusalem was turned to dust by the Romans. God's wrath is real and it is terrible. Feast daily on this salvation by reading and meditating on God's Word and calling upon Him prayer. Avail yourself often of the gift of individual confession and absolution. Make the sign of the holy cross upon yourself and say again and again "I am baptized into Christ." Set aside every Lord's Day, and/or, come Wednesday morning to stand in Christ's presence and partake of the feast of Christ's Holy Body and Precious Blood which He has offered to atone for all your sins. Make plans to gather here in prayer on Friday morning as you eagerly await the Lord's return.

But beware. You cannot enter the feast without the proper wedding garments which God has prepared. You must be dressed in the righteousness of Christ which is put on in faith. You may fool the world and they may think that you're a

wonderful person. You may fool yourself and truly believe that you have worked hard and trained yourself to be a righteous-enough person that God should reward you. You may even fool the Church by saying all the right words, participating in the sacraments, and going through the motions. But you will not fool God. He sees your heart. He knows what you love and what you trust. Beware. Most certainly those wicked men were singing a different tune when the king's troops showed up at the door to destroy them and their city but it was too late. The time of repentance was over. The day of judgment draws ever nearer when God's wrath against those who despised the feast and rejected His Son will be poured out in full measure. Stop worrying about trying to save your life in the world. This is neither your kingdom nor your home.

God has provided you with the right garment, the garment made of the righteousness of the Lamb. It is free gift to those who desire it and, again, those who desire it are those who know that they don't deserve it. They receive it with humility and joy and thanksgiving. Without Christ's righteousness as your hope and the center of your faith, you will be cast out into the outer darkness covered only in your guilt and shame. There is no other righteousness, no other garment, that covers the filthiness of your flesh. Adam and Eve tried with the leaves, but those were insufficient. There was no sacrifice, no fatted calf, and therefore no blood. They needed life because they were dead and the life is in the blood. No Blood - no life. Only death.

Now maybe at this point you're wondering if you are among the chosen? "Am I a fraud? Will I be cast out? Am I just going through the motions only to be condemned. If so, good. This text, by design, is meant to make you ask that question. It is meant to unsettle you so that God can resettle you in the right place. If you aren't sure whether you are among the elect you will be tempted to look at your faith. How strong is it? How constant is it in the midst of temptation and persecution. Don't. Your faith isn't strong like it should be. The first commandment tells you that. Your faith waivers. It has failed. You have doubted. You have taken salvation lightly and at times not cared about it at all. You have followed your flesh into sin. You have built high walls to protect yourself from the hammer of the Law. Repent.

Now look away from your faith. Look here...at Jesus, whom God gave. Trust Him only. Don't trust your faith - that is idolatry. Trust Jesus - that is true worship. Believe what God has said in Christ, that YOU are forgiven. Jesus shed His Blood for YOU. Believe Him when He says that the Father loves those who love the Son. Believe God when He says that He desires mercy and not sacrifice

and that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but desires that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Believe Jesus when He says that He came not to judge the world but to save it. Are you part of “the world”? You must be. Therefore Jesus died and forgave YOUR sins. You have heard the invitation and that again right now! Come buy and eat, you who have no money, no righteousness, no goodness to offer God. Feast on the rich food of the Body and Blood of the Son of God, the Son of Mary. Eat what is good and let this true eternal rich food be your every delight. Feast on the life and mercy of God and take the seat at the King’s table which He has prepared just for you. Heed the gracious invitation of God to daily feast and be satisfied with His righteousness which is ours in Christ Jesus.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.