

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)
St. Matthew 22:1-14

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When one hears this parable, the natural inclination is to look at what all of the people are doing. These people are invited to a feast. When it came time for the feast, they are fetched by a servant, but each of them gives excuses and declines showing up. Additionally, they take those who came to fetch them and treated them spitefully and killed them. Of course, this would incense the one who invited them, and in the parable, he destroyed the invitees and burned up their cities.

Then, there are other people brought to the feast, and again, the attention is on them. The hall is filled with guests, but one of them isn't wearing the proper wedding garments. It was traditional in the time of Jesus that when you invited someone to a wedding feast, you provided them the appropriate attire. When he's approached about it, he hasn't an answer. So, he is bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now, you might recognize the history of Israel in the first group. They were the chosen nation, God's people—least among the nations, a nation of slaves, in fact. But God chose them to be the nation by which He would redeem and save the world. Led out of slavery in Egypt by the hand of God, and how did they repay Him? Disobedience, unfaithfulness, complaining and quarreling—the typical stuff of fallen human nature.

What's a God to do? Well, first He warned His invitees by the prophets, inviting them back to the feast which was prepared for them, but warning them that if they didn't repent, the consequences would be harsh. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37) That was Jesus mourning over Jerusalem and all of Judah for her faithlessness. Well, they did kill the prophets, just as the people killed the servants in the parable, and God did burn their cities, first sending the Assyrians to destroy the Northern Kingdom then the Babylonians to bring the Southern Kingdom into exile. But a remnant remained.

This is similar to the parable you heard last week, of the wicked tenants. The nation of Israel is represented by the tenants. Like the invitees in today's parable, they treat the servant prophets spitefully. So, the owner reckons that they would respect his son, but they kill him supposing that this will gain them the inheritance. It all sounds so foolish today, a foolishness in which you participate in one way or another, as mentioned last week.

Consider these parables with this in mind, though: After nearly 70 years in captivity in Babylon, the remnant returned to Jerusalem and Judea. They rebuilt their country and homes and the temple. About 400 years passed, 400 years of veritable silence from God and His prophets; but after those 400 years, "[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5) The descendants of that remnant treated the Son spitefully and killed Him. Why? He was a threat to their religious status quo, developed over those 400 years; it was a system by which they assumed that they would gain heaven: following the Law, even and including man-made ordinances superimposed on the Law of God. Jesus turned their religion upside down, and for that, He was better off dead, in their estimation—out of their way to the inheritance.

But, His death ushered in a new era. It is a time of peace with God by way of the blood of the Lamb. This peace with God, however, was not just for His chosen people, but for all nations. The original intent behind God choosing a nation—choosing the nation that He did—was that One would come out of it who would be Savior of the world: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of

the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) So, the hall is now filled with guests, both good and bad—both Jew and Gentile.

This wedding feast is that between the Lamb and His Bride, the Church. This is one of my favorite images from the Passion of the Christ. On the cross, as Jesus hung dying, He left Father and mother and was joined to His Bride. He joined His bride by assuming Her members’ filthiness, spots, blemishes, and sins into His own flesh and dying with them, presenting Her to Himself without all of that, as St. Paul wrote. (cf. Ephesians 5:25-27) All who are at this wedding feast, then, are robed in Christ’s righteousness—or, they should be.

You see, while the feast is ongoing in eternity, there is but only a foretaste happening here. Prophets today—those called ministers of the Word, the stewards of the mysteries of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1)—can only operate as a steward of the mysteries based on what is confessed that those present at this foretaste of the feast are arrayed in the robes of Christ’s righteousness. He may know the people well, know their life stories, he may even have baptized those people, or they may be first timers in the congregation, it doesn’t matter; all he can go by is the confession they make before they are admitted to the Lord’s Table. Only God knows, there may be one who has refused the wedding garments—those robes of Christ’s righteousness—and are taking the Sacrament to their harm and, ultimately and unrepentantly, to their damnation.

How does this look? Well, there are several iterations.

- There are those who claim a right to a place at the foretaste at a place because they bear the name Christian. Their confession may differ than the confession made at that particular altar, and their understanding of what the Sacrament is (and isn’t) and who should or shouldn’t take it may be lacking or simply denied for the sake of convenience.
- There are those who claim a right to a place at the foretaste in a place like this because they bear the name Lutheran. They attend a church which claims the name Lutheran, have been life-long members there, even confess to have read the writings of the good doctor and love him, but their confession differs as before from the confession made at this altar. It would be someone who belongs to a congregation of a different Lutheran body, for instance, but still demands a place at this table.
- There are those who claim a right to a place at the foretaste in a place like this for the reason that they have been a life-long member of that congregation. Pastor so-and-so, who founded the congregation, baptized them, they have served on this board and that, they have donated one object or the next to the congregation (and their name can be found all over the place as a result), they have given to one endowment or another at the congregation (basically bankrolling the place), and they work to keep the place neat and tidy, and for any one of these things (or for all of them), they believe they deserve a place at the table of the Lord.

And there are many others, not the same, but similar. They are all similar in the fact that their claim to a place at the foretaste is based solely on what they have done or who they have made themselves out to be. And you know what? It can be stated as simply as, “I take communion at Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church because I am a member at Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church.” Where is the talk of worthiness, and where that comes from? Where is the talk of Christ and His robe of righteousness? Oh, it may be assumed, but as a dear professor used to like to say, “The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied.”

But God does know. He knows the heart of all of those who are of the Bride of Christ or claim to be. He can see whether or not they wear the wedding garments.

So, if you claim a right to the place and the benefits given out in the name of Jesus Christ solely on your merits, then repent. The words you use in your confession of faith may be the right ones, but in your heart, you don’t really believe them. Dear hearers, that’s all of you. There is not one here who does not in some way, no matter how small, trust in their works or merits. Repent, believe the Gospel, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance!

For the truth of the eternal wedding feast and life everlasting is that you have it all by grace. Your place at the Lord's Table at the foretaste is also yours by grace. Your wedding garments—the robes of Christ's righteousness—are given to you by grace, placed on you by the single act of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And God is also merciful. Like I said, each one here has moments when you think yourselves worthy of God and salvation by your own merits. But, God is merciful to overlook and forgive your transgressions. I say overlook to mean that when God now looks at you who are in Christ Jesus, He sees His Son, for whose sake your sins are covered—He sees a saint where a sinner stands!

And that brings me to the point of all of this. I said earlier that when one hears today's parable, the natural inclination is to look at what the people are doing. It's not that what they are doing isn't important. But looking at what they are doing, as natural as it is for fallen man, ignores what it is that the master has done.

- He invited people to the wedding feast.
- He sent out servants to bring in those who were invited.
- He showed wrath to those who refused him and rejected his invitation.
- He sent out servants to gather others to fill his hall, both good and bad.
- He provided garments to everyone attending the wedding feast.
- He has one who refuses his gift of garments tossed into outer darkness.

Now, aside from the displays of wrath—which is righteous indignation against those who refuse the graciousness of God—everything that the people have is from the gracious hand of the master. The kingdom of heaven is compared to this, so the fact that the people have what they do in the parable demonstrates the love and compassion of your gracious heavenly Father.

Otherwise, whenever the people are doing anything, to be understood as doing something apart from what God is having them do or with something other than what He has given them, it leads to grave consequences. These works are refusal and rejection, even if they think they are doing something good or beneficial. The consequence is being consumed by God's wrath—being tossed into outer darkness. People have what they need—especially that one thing needful—only by way of God's grace for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it bears repeating that the truth of the eternal wedding feast and life everlasting is that you have it all by grace. Your place at the Lord's Table at the foretaste is also yours by grace. Your wedding garments—the robes of Christ's righteousness—are given to you by grace, placed on you by the single act of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For God loved His creation so that He sent His only-begotten Son into the flesh, Jesus Christ, and all who by grace believe in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. Look at the one doing all the verbs: God loves, God sends, God gives faith, and God gives everlasting life. And because He does all of this, and you have received faith to believe and trust in Him, then for the sake of Christ Jesus your Lord and Savior, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.