

The 19th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
October 11, 2020
PROPER 23

The Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9
 Psalm 23
 Philippians 4:4-13
 Matthew 22:1-14

The Hymns: # 790 (1,2,5) *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*
 # 782 (1-3) *Gracious God, You Send Great Blessings*
 # 785 (1-3) *We Praise You, O God (Offertory Hymn)*
 # 895 (1-3) *Now Thank We All Our God*

The Collect: Almighty God, your mercies are new every morning and You graciously provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your goodness, give thanks for Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience all our days; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:

“Dinner’s Ready”
 Pentecost 21
 Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Dear Friends in Christ:

Mealtimes are often filled with emotion of all kinds. Peter knows. Sunday dinners with his mother, Ada, his father, Fred, and three siblings were always lively. "On one occasion", says Peter, "all of us except Mother were in a silly mood, and we began requesting, in rhyme, various items at the table. 'Please pass the meat, Pete.' 'May I have a potatah, Ada?' 'I'd give the moon for a spoon'. After several minutes of this, Mother was fed up. She stood up: 'Stop this nonsense right now! It's Sunday, and I'd like to enjoy my dinner with some good conversation, not this silly chatter.' Then she sat down, still in a huff, turned to my father and snapped, 'Pass the bread, Fred.'"

One of the most disturbing signs of our time is the frequent complaint about how hard it is to get a family together, even for meal time. Something about eating together establishes a bond among the participants, and when families no longer eat together some of the glue that binds them together dries up and weakens them. Eating together has been a way of creating a bond through the ages. How many times in the Bible are promises, covenants and friendships sealed by the sharing of a meal! Celebrations of special events, such as the destruction of death which is predicted in today's Old Testament Lesson, are the joyous occasion for feasting together. Rejoicing is a community activity and requires food and fellowship. It is not surprising, then, to find that the last great gathering of God's people is pictured as a wedding feast — a meal observing the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a whole new life when bride and bridegroom are joined into an indissoluble unity.

In Jesus' parable, the identity of the characters is quite clear. God the Father is the king, and Jesus is the son. The Jewish hearers would have been very familiar with the image of God as King, and with prophecies of the Messiah as God's Son. Jesus told this parable just two days following his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday into Jerusalem where the crowds had acclaimed him as "Son of David", a title which combines the concept of both king and his son.

If God is the king, and Jesus is the son, who is the bride? Our text doesn't give an answer. However, there are numerous passages in the Bible that portray Christ as the bridegroom and the church as His bride. Revelation 19:6-9 combines the images of God as King, Christ as bridegroom; and the church as both the bride and as those invited to the wedding banquet:

"Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.' (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints). Then the angel said to me, 'Write: "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"

The wedding banquet Jesus pictures in our parable is no ordinary wedding. It is a state affair. The crown prince is to be married and the King spares no expense in his preparations. In Biblical times a wedding feast might last for 7 or even 14 days. Certainly, it was quite an honor to be invited, and the host would have made lavish and expensive preparations. The son will be honored, and the celebration will take place, regardless of the reaction of those invited.

We need to understand that Jesus' parable is told just a few short days before his crucifixion. This is the third parable where we see Jesus confronting and denouncing the Jewish leaders in their own home court, the Temple, with their rejection of God's grace and love. Although they have plotted against him, Jesus' adversaries are powerless to prevent his exaltation. The only question is who will participate in the celebration. The invitation is sent out through the servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them that all is now prepared and that it is time to come.

But how strangely the guests respond! Their refusal to attend the royal wedding must be a protest born of fear or hatred toward a terribly cruel dictator. But why would a ruthless despot graciously invite them, free of charge, to a joyful celebration? Verse 5 clears up the matter. The fault is not with the king, but with the unwilling guests: "They paid no attention and went off — one to his field, another to his business." They greeted the invitation with apathy. The Greek word *amelew* means "to neglect, be unconcerned, disregard". It is a word that is used elsewhere in the New Testament for people spurning salvation. Their personal business is more important than the king's invitation. More important than His Son's wedding.

Self-centered pride motivates the invited group. They consider the wedding unworthy of their time and dignity. This becomes very real today when we invite our friends or acquaintances to participate in the great banquet of salvation and they respond with apathy and indifference. The Gospel of Salvation is not worthy of their time and effort. It is clear that many reject the invitation simply because they have what they consider "more important things to do" — other fields to cultivate and business to attend to. "I cannot come — too many things to do. I work all

week and Sunday morning is the only time I have to myself. I cannot come — the kid's practice comes first and that's on Sunday. I cannot come — I have to work. I have too much to do. Still others respond not with apathy and indifference, but with vehemence and anger.

In the parable, they rise up against the servants who are sent, treating them in an arrogant, spiteful and outrageous manner. The king sends his messengers only to have them humiliated and killed. How hard Israel has been on her prophets! It is still happening today. Attacks against Christianity have been vicious and cruel. That is particularly true of the media which is quick belittle and attack Christianity at every possible turn. The church that holds to the clear teachings of the Bible is considered old fashioned and out of date and irrelevant.

The King's anger expresses itself in swift and final justice that is not to be trifled with. His officers execute the murders and burn their city. The king judges them unworthy, not because they were outside of his grace, but because they rejected his grace, spurned his goodness, and considered other things more important. And yet the king's good grace will prevail. He instructs his servants to spread out and invite anyone. He dispatches them not to the market place, where respectable businessmen and civic officials would be, but to the "street corners", locations frequented by beggars and used by the common people. So great is the king's generosity that he explicitly tells his servants to invite "both good and bad" to fill up his celebration.

By God's grace you and I have been invited to participate in the wedding banquet. We were the poor sinners who could never have hoped even to be noticed by the king. But His call came to us. His invitation reached our hearts and brought us in. How wonderful is the love of God which has brought us to the banquet feast of our Bridegroom, Jesus Christ!

The end of the parable stands out in a particular way. It seems a bit odd at first to hear of the man thrown out of the banquet hall because he has no wedding garment. After all, if he has just been drawn off the street without a chance to go home and change, how could he have a wedding garment? Since the others apparently DO have such a garment even though they, too, have just come off the street, it seems that the King Himself must have provided them with festal garments. The grace of the King provides not only the invitation but also the wedding garments which are to be worn! Isn't this what forgiveness of sins is — a garment of God's grace covering the stains of our life? "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered," the psalmist says in Ps.32:1. Our new life in Christ is also spoken of as something to put on. We "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator...Therefore...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience...and over all these virtues put on love", St. Paul writes in Colossians 3. A new way of life is "put on" with the "covering" of the forgiveness of sins.

What arrogance, then, to try to enter the wedding hall on our own terms! The King who issues the invitation can set the terms of entering the hall since all that is necessary for entering is available from Him. When a person attempts to enter it on terms other than the invitation, as though the outsider establishes the criteria for entrance, it becomes apparent that, rather than being honored, such a person is asserting himself, flaunting himself before the King as entrance is sought on terms other than the invitation. "Then the king told the attendants, "Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

God has clothed us with the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. His righteousness covers over all our sins and makes us presentable for the kingdom of heaven. That garment of righteousness was placed on us at our Baptism when through water and the Word of God we were made heirs of salvation. How God has honored us! How He has bestowed upon us the riches of his love. And how we spurn and reject that great honor if we refuse to wear the garment of Christ's righteousness and think that we are acceptable on our own terms and by our own merits!

"For many are invited, but few are chosen." The hardheartedness of mankind makes even God's grace work overtime to achieve the ends which He seeks. God's ways are always gracious, but they are indeed His ways and not ours! We walk by faith, not by sight; we live by grace, not by works; we live by trust in God and not merely by assenting to an idea that God is good. His gracious invitation is our only hope. The way of God, then, calls for obedience and righteousness, which is far more than mere good will toward God and an outwardly decent life. It calls for our full attention to the King in every way, for when we give Him such attention, we soon discover that even the homes and businesses we were afraid to leave are not really ours anyway. They, too, belong to the King and are gifts from Him to us that we might care for them in His name. So we are not even asked to leave **our** home or **our** business when the invitation comes!

He knows very well what he is doing, and His invitation is extended to discover among us whether we know who really possesses not only the wedding hall but all other things as well. All that counts is that He extends the invitation. The invitation is the ultimate Word of the Lord. And the feast is nothing less than life itself, eternal life. The invitation has gone out. Dinner is ready! Come to the wedding banquet! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.