

Matt 22:1-14**You are Invited**

This week's Gospel lesson continues Christ's admonition to those who believe they have a right to enter the Kingdom of Heaven because of who they are or what they have done.

Jesus knows He is headed to the cross and as He turns His face to the cross He ramps up His warnings to those who have been misleading God's people into thinking they can earn their way into heaven by their own efforts. He also increases His admonition to those who are indifferent to God's gracious invitation to enter His kingdom and be saved.

It is clear from the readings from the past few weeks that the Jewish leadership has rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Immediately before our text for today we are told that the chief priests and the Pharisees were seeking to arrest Jesus. But they were afraid to do it because the people considered Him to be a prophet from God. In the verses following our text we are told that they start plotting to entangle Him in His own words in order to discredit Him with the people.

But Jesus has a bit more to say before He will allow Himself to be taken by force and killed. Therefore, He tells a parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast. When we hear His description of heaven, our minds are filled with images of a heavenly banquet hall filled rich food and heavenly creatures. We may even imagine the banquet hall filled with angels and archangels and, perhaps, our dearly departed loved ones. But that isn't what Jesus has in mind as He tells this parable. Jesus is talking about God's kingdom as it exists and manifests itself here on earth.

In Confirmation class we speak of the Kingdom of God consisting of three kingdoms: the Kingdom of Power (a.k.a. Creation), the Kingdom of Grace (a.k.a. the Church), and the Kingdom of Glory (a.k.a. Heaven). In this parable, Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom of Grace, the Church.

As Jesus tells this parable it is as if He is telling it from the perspective of Judgment Day as He looks back over the whole history of humanity. He likens it to a king who prepared a wedding feast for His Son. Not surprisingly, the King is God the Father. Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father, and the banquet He has prepared is eternal life in heaven. What happens between the time the feast is prepared and Judgment Day is played out in the parable and in the Church on earth.

In Jesus' parable, the history of God's plan of salvation for His people is revealed. The King sends His servants to those whom He has invited to come to the banquet hall. These are His chosen people and He wants them to know that all is ready and they should come now. But they refuse to come. They don't even bother to make any excuses. They just flat out reject the King's invitation to come to the banquet He has prepared especially for them.

But the king won't give up on them. He is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ps 86:15). Therefore, He sends out other servants and says to them, "Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared My dinner...everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast'" (v4).

He instructs his servants to give his invited guests more details about the feast he has prepared. Perhaps if they know what a great feast He has prepared they will come. "There is rich food, aged wine, and the best meats."

But even after being told what the King has prepared for them, they still refuse to come. And this time they have all sorts of excuses for refusing to come. Some offer plausible and seemingly polite excuses: "Sorry, I can't make. I have to work. I have to get the crops in. We have guests coming from out of town so I'll be staying home to be with them. It's been a long week and I really need to get some rest. You understand." The King understands, alright. He understands that they really aren't interested in receiving the gifts He is offering them at His banquet. The distractions and pleasures of the world are more important to them.

Others respond more crudely: "I only get one day off a week and I really don't want to waste it at the banquet hall of the King. I don't have time for that. The kids have a tournament this weekend and that's more important. Besides, I don't like some of the people you've invited to your little party, so, I won't be accepting your invitation."

But that's not the worst of it. Some of those who are invited to the feast seize the King's servants, roughed them up, and even kill some of them! There isn't any doubt that many of God's prophets, apostles, and preachers have been mistreated throughout the centuries. And it is still happening in many parts of the world today, especially in places dominated by a so called "religion of peace." But it also happens right here our own communities, when pastors are mistreated by members of their congregations for being faithful to the Word of God and holding those who have been invited to the King's feast accountable for their sinfulness.

Not surprisingly, the King is outraged. Time has run out on His mercy and grace. It is important that we understand that the "king" Jesus is talking about is the King of heaven and earth, the Lord God Almighty, and there is a limit to His patience. He has extended His invitation time and time again only to have it rejected over and over again. He has sent one servant after another, only to have them sent packing or killed. My friends, make no mistake, there does come a time when the Lord says, "Enough is enough."

Seeing that His banquet hall is not yet filled He extends His invitation to those who will not refuse His gracious invitation. He tells His servants to go into the highways and byways and invite anyone they find. He extends His grace and generosity to them while leaving those who have rejected His invitation out in the dark where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Here we see just how gracious the King truly is. You see, His invitation is for everyone, even those we may think are unworthy to receive it; even those who have rejected His invitation in the past would be welcomed if they would only turn from their self-centeredness and worldliness and accept His invitation. All are welcome to come to the feast the King has prepared -- including you.

Jesus does not end His parable with the generosity and welcoming heart of the King. There is still more to the story. Many have heard and accepted the King's invitation to come to His banquet, but one guest in particular catches the eye of the King, and in this case, that's not a good thing, because the King notices he isn't wearing a proper wedding garment.

The issue isn't that the man is poorly dressed or that he is being discriminated against because he lacks the proper clothing. The issue is that he has refused to put on the special robe the King has provided for him to wear.

Remember, this was a last-minute invitation, so there wasn't time to run home and put on a tuxedo. The invitation was "come as you are." And that's okay, because the King will supply the proper dress for the occasion. He will make sure that all His guests are wearing the proper robe; the robe that He Himself provides. This man's refusal to wear the robe provided by the King was an insult to the King. It was as if the man was saying, "I don't need your robe. I have my own and it's better than yours."

That didn't sit very well with the King so he asked the man "How did you get in here without a wedding garment?" And the man was speechless. There was no excuse for his arrogance. And his decision to come to the banquet on his own terms cost him dearly. He was bound hand and foot and thrown out of the banquet hall into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. What we learn from this portion of Jesus' parable is there is no place at the King's banquet table for those who want to enter His banquet on their own terms.

In this parable, Jesus is speaking not only to the religious leaders of His day, but also to you and me. Rather than hearing this as an interesting story about Jesus putting the Sadducees and Pharisees in their place, we should turn an attentive ear to what our Savior is saying to us and ask ourselves, "How does this parable apply to me?"

For instance, are you one who has been invited to come to the Lord's banquet but find one excuse after another to get out coming? Are you one who prefers his earthly pleasures and making money to receiving the gifts God offers and gives in the banquet hall of His church? Are you one who thinks the robe of your good works will be acceptable to the Master of the Feast?

Like the Jewish leaders who had become too comfortable in the Jewishness, we too can become too comfortable in our "Christianity." Far too many people think they are Christians simply because they were baptized as infants and then went through the motions of confirmation class. They foolishly think they spent enough time at the banquet hall when they were younger, so they don't need to come to the feast anymore. Others, like the man who was thrown out of the banquet hall, think they can do their own thing and still take part in the banquet. They should think again.

This parable compels us to ask ourselves some very difficult question. "Am I guilty of making excuses and avoiding God's invitation to come to the feast He has prepared for me? Am I coming to the King's feast on His terms or my own? Am I seeking to have a share in God's eternal banquet in the way He wants me to, by faith alone in the merits of Jesus Christ, who died for my sins, or am I trying to convince Him that my robe of good works qualifies me to gain entry into the banquet He has prepared? Am I covered with the filthy rags of my arrogance and self-righteousness, or with the blood-stained robe of Christ's perfect and holy righteousness?"

The consequences of rejecting the King's invitation, or being found wearing your own robe to His banquet instead of the one He provides, are truly terrible. As we learn from Jesus' parable, there is only one way to be saved from the King's righteous anger and judgment. and that is to heed His invitation to come to the banquet He has prepared for you in His Church and receive the gifts He has prepared for you. To be saved from the terrors of eternal darkness in hell, you must be found wearing the righteous robe of salvation the King's Son provides through His shed blood on the cross.

As the Isaiah the prophet declares, "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Is 61:10).

And that is precisely what God the Father offers to you, for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, who gave His life on the cross, to pay the price for your sins. All your materialism, all your earthly-mindedness, your choosing to follow the ways of the world instead of the ways of the kingdom of God – it has all been paid for, covered completely by the robe of Christ's righteousness, which He freely and generously gives to everyone who hears and heeds His invitation to come to Him in Holy Baptism, just as He has done for John Charles Fesser (tonight) last night.

As we learn from Jesus' parable, the King does not discriminate according to age or gender or race when He extends His invitation to come to the feast He has prepared. His instructions are very clear. "Go to the main roads and invite as many as you can find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found" (Mt 22:9,10).

As little as he is, John Charles Fesser is included in God's open invitation to "come as you are" to the banquet feast the King has prepared. And to ensure that he is properly dress for the banquet, God the Father has clothed him in Holy Baptism with the spotless robe of Christ's perfect righteousness, just as He has done for you and me.

My friends, our gracious and merciful King is still extending His invitation to you, and all people, to come to His banquet hall that He may feed you with the sumptuous food of His Word and the sweet wine of His forgiveness for your sins. He invites you to discard your filthy rags of self-importance, self-interest, and self-righteousness and put on the wedding garment of salvation that He provides for you through faith in His Son.

Through the preaching and the teaching of His Holy Word the King of all Creation invites you to receive here on earth a foretaste of His eternal banquet in heaven. He invites you to recline at His table and partake of the feast of victory that He has prepared to nourish your soul and strengthen your faith through the eating and drinking of the very body and blood of the Lamb who was slain to pay for your sins, and rose again for your salvation. He invites you to come to His feast, each and every Lord's Day, to receive and enjoy the bounty of His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation as you await the return of Christ, your King, who will lead you into the eternal banquet hall of heaven forever.

Everything is ready, and you have an open invitation.

Amen