

Sermon on Matthew 22:1-14, Isaiah 25:1-9
17th Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Everybody likes to be invited to a banquet or a feast. Am I right about this? You and I all like good food, and if it's free, or part of a larger celebration, so much the better! But have you ever turned down an invitation? I have. Sometimes the banquet is a fundraiser, and we don't have the money for a donation. Sometimes we have a conflicting engagement, and have to decline with regret. Sometimes we are sick, and just can't come. Or we don't like the people who invited us. Or we think we have "nothing to wear" – we would need a new suit, or a new dress, and we don't have the money or the time to go shopping. Or we have another excuse, good or bad – well, you get the idea. It's complicated!

So, most of us have turned down an invitation to a banquet or a feast at some point in our lives. Maybe we then hear about how good or fun it was later, and regret turning it down. Or maybe you decided to go, and felt uncomfortable – because you didn't know anybody there. Maybe you felt out of place, because you wore a tea dress when others wore formal gowns (how awkward!), or wore pants to a Scottish wedding when other men wore kilts. How embarrassing! But has anyone here ever been thrown out of a wedding or a gala banquet for not wearing the proper clothes?

It happened at the wedding banquet described in Matthew's gospel. What was that all about? Well, Jesus told a parable about this wedding when he was teaching in the Temple of Jerusalem, to the chief priests and Pharisees who wanted to arrest him. He compared the kingdom of heaven to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son, and sent out invitations to all the high class folk normally on the "guest list". However, nobody wanted to come. WE aren't told why. The king sent out another invitation, but everyone was too busy. Some even beat up the servants who brought the invitation. The king was enraged, and sent out soldiers to destroy them and burn their homes and city. Then he sent out his servants to invite the poor and need, both good and bad, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests. A similar parable is found in Luke's gospel, by the way, except in Luke, the king doesn't send out his troops. He just invites all those hanging out on the street to come to the wedding instead of those wealthy folks who turned him down.

But Matthew tells a different sort of parable. We don't like it all that much. Last Tuesday I went to the weekly text study I go to at a nearby church, and arrived a bit late. I found the other pastors complaining about how hard it was to get people to make a commitment to "join". The discussion soon turned into something we might call "whining". I guess a lot of this going around in mainline churches these days, when Sunday worship attendance all over America is declining, and even those

raised in the church from childhood, find other things to do, are too busy or not interested, when pastors come calling.

But Matthew's version of the parable finds the king so angry that he sends out troops to destroy the homes of those who turned down his invitation, and killed those who abused his servants. Sounds drastic! We decided that this parable must be hyperbole, an exaggeration by Jesus to make a point with his parable. The king couldn't be standing for God, could he? God wouldn't send troops of angels to destroy those who don't respond to God's invitation of grace. At least that's not a "Lutheran" interpretation of the parable! The meaning must be about the importance of the invitation, that there are consequences in our lives when we don't respond to grace - when we don't "show up" when God calls us - and that others who are less privileged than us will respond, and be invited instead. But don't take it too literally! Keep in mind Matthew's context: the city of Jerusalem had just been destroyed by the Romans, which Matthew and other Christians may have interpreted as God's judgment and a warning. Or maybe the king was the Roman emperor, who destroyed those who wouldn't bow to Rome?

Matthew then adds a new ending: a man showed up at the wedding NOT wearing appropriate clothing (no wedding gown – no tux – no suit or tie!). He was tied up and cast out into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Very harsh! That ending really made the Pharisees mad – could Jesus have been talking about them? Anyway, our pastor's study group decided that if you were looking for "God's grace" in this parable, you'd have a hard time finding it here, unless you focus on those out on the streets who weren't originally invited, but responded to the second round of invitations, with appreciation, and filled up the wedding hall. Is there a point for us, that some will see God's grace in Jesus' invitation and respond to the good news, in great numbers, with gratitude?

A more inviting feast is found in our first lesson from Isaiah, where the prophet promises that God will make a great feast of rich foods on God's holy mountain, to which ALL people will be invited! It will be a "*feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*" No gunk or sediment in the bottom of the bottle, at God's great feast! Everyone is invited to this banquet, and no one is turned away, or thrown out.

So what's being celebrated here? It starts as a hymn of praise to God, who does wonderful things! What had God done? Well, in the 7th century B.C.E., in the time of King Josiah's reign, the Assyrian empire was defeated by the Babylonians. The people of Judah, who had been a vassal state, forced to pay "protection money" to Assyria to keep their army from destroying them, now were free from this burden. Isaiah gave God the credit, for working through foreign empires like Babylonia, to come to the aid of God's people of Israel and Judah. So Isaiah sang a song of praise, much like in the book of Exodus, after God destroyed Pharaoh's army in the parting

of the Red Sea, when Moses, Miriam and all the Israelites took out tambourines and sang a song of joy and praise to the Lord! Now Isaiah sang because God had used the Babylonians to deliver them from the Assyrian army.

God had made the Assyrian's city a heap. Archaeologists think that this outpost was the one called *Ramat Rachel*, just outside Jerusalem, where the Assyrians kept a garrison until it was destroyed. Then it was abandoned until Roman times, who stationed a Legion there to occupy Jerusalem. This place is now a *kibbutz*, built in 1926, where the Hotel Ramat Rachel is now located, to house groups who come there for archaeological digs. The hotel comes complete with swimming pool, tennis courts, and a Jacuzzi, with a panoramic view of Bethlehem! But I digress.

The destruction of the fortress at *Ramat Rachel* was God's judgment for the bad behavior of the Assyrians. For in Isaiah chapter 10 Isaiah says, "*Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?....Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger – the club in their hands is my fury.*" So tyrants beware!

But today's passage turns from judgment for Assyria into restoration for the people of Judah. The people will now sing glory to God, "*For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat...On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food...*" God would even destroy the shroud which hangs over all peoples, and swallow up death forever. "*Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken....Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation!*"

So today we hear what seem to be mixed messages of judgment and salvation in our scripture. Is this a warning to us to take seriously God's invitation, lest we miss out on the opportunity for grace? Are there consequences for neglecting God's call, or ignoring God's favor for the poor and needy, the widow and the orphan? Or is the real message that of good news for the poor, God's invitation to all who have been left out on earth from God's abundance by the greed of others, and God's promise that one day *all tears will be wiped away, and all people on earth will feast on God's holy mountain?* Is it a warning of possible judgment, or a promise of salvation made certain by God's mercy and love?

That question appears to be answered clearly by Isaiah, who directs his warning to the oppressors of God's people (the Assyrians), who are defeated by another foreign power: the Babylonians. But the promise is certain for the future,

that the day will come when ALL PEOPLE will enjoy a feast together on God's mountain.

The promise rings true as well in Jesus' parable, where God's invitation to the feast continues to go out, even when we humans turn it down, or think we are too busy for God, or even abuse God's messengers. The invitation to the feast continues to go out, again and again! The proof is that Jesus did not call down armies of angels to destroy those who betrayed him, arrested him, convicted and executed him. He endured it all, and even while he suffered and died on a cross, Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*"

The fear of God as a motivator is outdone by God's invitation, delivered in person by Jesus, who lived, taught, suffered and died for you, for me, and for all people in this world to come to God's banquet! Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus invites you and me to follow him on a path that leads to this life, which culminates in this great promised feast, shared with people of all nations and faiths, on God's holy mountain of grace, when we shall all live in peace, without tears, without pain.

In the meantime, we still live with tyrants, who build walls of exclusion, make decrees and write executive orders, that prey upon the poor and needy, the widow and orphan, the stranger and the immigrant. We continue to struggle with our own ambivalence about faith in God or love for neighbor, and whether we will commit ourselves to this life of discipleship following Jesus. We continue to find ourselves too often angered by the perceived wrongs against us, distracted by the worries and cares of life, or by those things that give us pleasure or comfort, which cause us to neglect God's invitation to the one true life. This has always been our human dilemma, our challenge – some call it *sin*. We fail to understand the urgency of God's call, and that the invitation goes out to everyone!

Today we are reminded of the invitation to receive God's mercy and grace, to place ourselves in God's hands, to trust in Jesus who came to give us life. We hear the message of the psalmist, who said, "*The Lord is my shepherd, who gives me everything I need.*" To this shepherd we pray, "*You restore my soul, O Lord, and guide me along right pathways, ... [So then,] even though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me; You prepare a table before me – a great feast of love – so that I may dine together even with my enemies! Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days in my life, and I will dwell with them in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.*"