

Pentecost 19, October 11, 2020 (Mt 22:1-14; Php 4:4-9; Ps 23; Is 25:6-9)

God's giving a party, and you're invited! In fact, *everyone* is invited! The invitation isn't only for the rich, the healthy, the successful, and the fortunate. It's also for the poor, the ill, the crippled and otherwise challenged, and the unlucky. It's for the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you don't fit in one of these categories, it's for you, too!

Anyone—absolutely *anyone*—can come. There's only one catch. If you accept the invitation, you're expected to dress appropriately.

Today's gospel text continues a series of *warnings* in the final chapters of Matthew's gospel. Two weeks ago we heard the parable of two sons. One did his father's will, the other didn't.

That story had a lesson: prostitutes and tax collectors might bear more fruit for the kingdom than the unrepentant chief priests and elders, leaders of the religious community. The way things work in the kingdom of heaven is different from the way things work in this life.

In last week's parable, the wicked tenants refused payment to the landowner, killing first his servants, and then his son. The verdict was clear: disobedience and unresponsiveness deserve punishment.

Today's story is the strongest yet of these *parables of judgment*. Those who refused the invitation to the royal wedding, no matter how valid their reasons, were executed. End of story—for them, at least. But the King's banquet was prepared. All that was lacking were the guests.

For many decades theologians have discussed and disputed how this parable should be interpreted. I'll share just one version.

An *allegory* is a story in which each character represents someone else. If we read today's gospel as an allegory, here's how it breaks down:

- The king is God.
- The Son is Jesus.
- The wedding feast is what we call the *messianic banquet* (the banquet of the Messiah). It's the grand dining table in heaven, of which our holy communion is just a foretaste.
- The invited guests are the people of Israel, particularly the religious leaders: chief priests, teachers of the law, Pharisees, and Sadducees.
- The first servants sent out are the Hebrew prophets, who spoke God's word to a nation that refused to listen.
- The second and third sets of servants are early Christians who spoke God's word to local Jews and the first of the gentile converts.
- The burned city is Jerusalem, demolished by the Romans in 70 A.D.
- The *good and the bad* who were brought in at the end are the members of the early church, which welcomed both the righteous and the unrighteous.
- The wedding robe is righteousness in the sight of God.

It's important for us to understand that for at least thirty to forty years after Jesus' death, there was no conflict between "Christians and Jews," as we might imagine it. Matthew and his community considered themselves to be faithful Jews following the long-awaited Messiah.

This allegory told by Jesus is the story of salvation history. It's the ongoing story in which God sent prophets, and then Christian evangelists and letter-writers, to preach the good news of God's saving love. This good news was rejected by some and accepted by others.

Where do you fit in this allegorical parable of Jesus? Where do *we* fit, St. John/St. Stephen ELCA in Edgar, Wisconsin? **The servants of the king went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.**

Everyone was invited! The good and the righteous, as well as the bad and the unrighteous, including the hypocrites who *looked* good but whose hearts and lives were somehow warped. *Everyone* was invited:

- the drunkard, the gambler,
- the prostitute, the adulterer,
- the wife-beater, the abusive mother
- the foul-mouthed daughter, the promiscuous son,
- the gossip, the cheat, the liar, the lazy bum.
- *Everyone.*

That's a really radical invitation! The people gathered from the streets are unworthy, they have no right to sit at the feast—except that they've been invited by a gracious king. In this parable, Jesus is inviting *all people* to join him as God's guests for a banquet in *the kingdom of heaven*.

At the time of Christ, "sinners" and non-religious people weren't welcome in the synagogues. As a matter of fact, people with physical or mental handicaps were actually barred from the synagogues. So the early church found an eager audience among those not welcomed elsewhere.

But the problem then, as now, was, *what does it mean to be in the kingdom of heaven?* We've all been invited, but are we dressed appropriately? *Hearing* the invitation is one thing, but that *hearing* must be followed by *understanding*, and eventually, by *action—bearing fruit*, in the words of Jesus and Paul.

You've been invited to the wedding banquet, and you've accepted the invitation—you've joined this congregation as part of the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers, the communion of saints.

You keep checking in to see if your spiritual clothing is appropriate—and to begin the laundering process—*repentance!*—if it's not. In this fellowship the grime of your sins is washed away by the blood of the Lamb, and the darkness in your heart can begin to give way to the light of God's love.

Within this body of Christ, if you seek forgiveness and a new life, God himself will provide a robe of repentance and mercy which leads to fruit-bearing faith.

Welcome to the feast! Welcome to the kingdom!