

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 22:1-14

An old Baptist preacher's story, tells of a parishioner who greeted his minister at the close of the service with the same observation, Sunday after Sunday: "You really gave it to them today, Preacher!" Over time, the pastor became concerned that this parishioner never seemed to consider anything in a sermon to be applicable to himself. He always seemed to exult in the fact, that the pastor had given it, "to them", whoever, "them", happened to be. At long last, there came a Sunday when a heavy snowstorm kept everybody away from church, except for the pastor and this particular parishioner. Abandoning the sermon he already had prepared for that morning, the pastor decided to focus exclusively on the sins and the short-comings he had noticed in the life of his singular captive audience. When the service was finished, that lone parishioner came to the door and shook the pastor's hand as he did every Sunday. The pastor waited, wondering how this parishioner would react to the blistering sermon he just heard. "Well, Preacher, 'the parishioner began, "If they'd been here today, you would really have given it to them!"

In our gospel narrative for today, Jesus gives His listeners, another parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. As you know, parables begin as earthly stories, speaking about things that we are familiar with, like a wedding banquet.

Say for instance, (just play along), if the President of the United States, or the Queen of England, or even the Governor of this State, invited you, to the wedding of his or her, son or daughter, wouldn't you find the time to go? Wouldn't you plan to be there? Wouldn't you make it a priority to be there, among all the things that you have going on in your daily life?

When we look at our gospel narrative for today, Jesus is giving us an interesting parable about a wedding banquet.

The son of the king is to be married soon, and so, as was the custom, the king sends out invitations to those whom he knows, respects, and loves.

Those invitations go out to those whom he deems close or perhaps, whom he loves and knows personally.

You know, that when someone plans a wedding, one generally does not send out invitations to just random people on the street, but one sends them out to family members, close friends, and associates.

And the king in the parable does just that, inviting those whom he loves. But those whom he invites, don't seem to care; they go about their day to day business, as if they could care less.

Not only does the king send out invitations, but he sends his servants, right to the homes of these people, but they refuse to go, they refuse to listen, and some of these folks even treat the king's servants with disdain, even murdering them.

The king is offering the finest food, his oxen and his fattened calves, much of his wealth, but the people whom he loves, those people, who he thought, loved him, they refuse to come; they're too busy, too distracted, too caught up in the cares of the world around them.

So what does this king do? Out of his anger and on account of their disrespect, he (the king) burns their city to the ground; he destroys their world, he destroys everything that they held dear, and he even destroys them.

But the king still desires to have guests at the wedding of his son, so he invites everyone else: the poor, the crippled, the beggars, the good and the bad.

Is this, what you would do? Would you invite random people, if you knew that all of your close friends, and loved ones refused to come to the wedding?

But what's the problem with doing this? Well, because you don't know who is going to show up. For all you know, you might end up with a person or two who shouldn't be there, or just shows up for the wrong reason, like a "wedding crasher", just as, in the one guest, in the parable, who came without a new wedding coat, which at the time of Jesus was a custom, for everyone invited to a wedding would have to wear.

If the person couldn't afford such a garment, the host, in this case, the king, would freely provide a wedding coat to the guest.

To not have that wedding coat, or to not approach the wedding host and ask for one, was disrespectful and it would be expected, that the unattired guest, would be asked to leave.

Now Jesus of course in this parable is talking about a little bit of history. First, he says, that God, or the king, invited people, in this case the Jews, of Israel, to the wedding of His Son.

Now the invitation, is an invitation to faith, and an invitation to believe that Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, the Son of God, has come to save them from their sin.

It's the exact same invitation that we hear today. When the Gospel is preached today, it is the same message that was proclaimed to the Jews of long ago, the same message which the prophets spoke, calling people to repent and to believe in God, to trust in His mercy, and to cling to His promise.

But God's people, the people, God delivered from the bondage of Egypt, the same people who crossed the Red Sea, who were given thousands and thousands of acres of land, who were cared for and protected, these same people refused to believe.

Time and time again, God called out to them, and made covenants with them and blessed them immeasurably, but time and time again, they said, "no". They refused to believe, they turned their backs.

They ran after idols, they married into pagan cultures, they did not listen. And as a result they were exiled, they were destroyed, their cities and their wealth was taken from them.

The Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Amos warned of this; but the people of Israel laughed at them, scorned them, and treated them with great disrespect. The people of Israel thought they had it all, and they thought they didn't need God.

Of course as Jesus is telling this parable, the Pharisees and the religious leaders, they knew what He was talking about, that He was talking about them and their history.

This is why, they wanted to put the Lord of Life to death. Jesus is a threat to their way of being, a threat to their self-righteousness and their piety, and they can't have that.

They're already contending with the Roman occupation, the last thing they need, is for some prophet to come and to take their people away.

Then Jesus goes on and says, that because of the unbelief of Israel and their disdain for God's invitation, God destroyed their city, and destroyed them as well.

And God begins to invite the "other people", and in this case, the gentiles, any and all of them; the good, the bad, and the ugly.

If the Kingdom of Israel doesn't want the salvation promised through my Son, then perhaps these gentiles, will come when invited.

Perhaps they will respond and join in the great wedding feast. And sure enough, here we are. Most of us here, have no connection with the Red Sea or Abraham, or with the ceremonial or sacrificial system of the Temple, but we are not here because of that, we are here because of "faith".

Again, it is the same invitation. God has called out to the nation of Israel and has called them to be a nation of faith, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and God calls us to be just the same, the invitation hasn't changed.

Forgiveness of sins, salvation, eternal life, it's always been since the very beginning. An invitation to become part of God's Church, to become people of faith.

You notice that in the parable, Jesus doesn't mention the bride, but only the bride-groom, the Son of God. And that is because, we as the Church, are the bride.

God sent His Son to prepare us for this great wedding feast, by dying on a cross, and being resurrected from the tomb.

God sent His Son into this sinful and fallen world, to cleanse us from our sins, to dress us in the royal wedding coat or wedding garment, and then to go and to prepare a place in the great kingdom, where we as His Church, His bride, will be with Him forever.

And as important as all this is, there is one part of this parable, which I think we need to look at and spend some time on.

That one man, that one guest who is at the wedding banquet without the wedding coat, or wedding garment, who is he?

Does he not know of the tradition? Does he not know that every wedding guest must come dressed in the proper attire?

Does he not know that he can approach the king and humbly explain his situation?

The garment, the wedding coat is the garment of salvation. It is the garment of the host, of God Himself, given to people, given to you and to me, which covers our sins and makes us acceptable in God's sight.

It is Christ's covering, the covering of forgiveness and grace on account of faith. Faith in Christ, faith that the work of Christ alone is sufficient and necessary for salvation.

The problem is that we tend to want to take that garment off. Our sinful nature does not like that free gift of grace and it desires to find its own way to salvation apart from God, and apart from the work of Christ.

The Christian faith is a simple thing. Faith in Christ, trust in God. That's it! That's it! And yet for most of us, it is a difficult thing for us to wrap our minds around.

Haven't you caught yourself saying; "Yes, it is faith alone", but then in the back of minds, you better get it right or God's not going to be happy with you!

Every week, as I prepare for the worship service, work on the sermons, spend time visiting with our shut-ins and home-bound, preparing to teach "confirmation", sometimes, that little voice is right there giving me reason to doubt, reason to question, and a reason to try and to please God.

But that is not faith! Faith isn't about me, faith isn't about you. Faith is about Christ. We can have everything right, but that doesn't make us faithful.

We can keep every commandment, conduct our liturgy perfectly, get along with everyone we come into contact with, we can sing beautifully, but that doesn't make us faithful.

Whenever we ask the question, "what makes us faithful", we're already asking the wrong question.

Nothing you do, nothing I do, nothing we do, will make us faithful. We can't make ourselves anything.

Whenever, we think we're faithful on account of our works, we truly are not. We are, just in fact, like the guest who walked into the wedding banquet without a wedding garment, was either too arrogant or too distracted to ask for one.

Either way, when we try to reach God by our own works, methods, or achievements, we will be thrown out.

But when the King, invites you, to a wedding banquet, and He gives you the garment to wear, and you don't even know why, that is faith.

You don't know why He has invited you, but you know there is a banquet, and you have been invited, and you walk up to the door of the wedding hall, and the king comes to you with the right garment, no strings attached, you go in and celebrate, that is faith!

It is a faith given by God. A faith that is nurtured and increased by God. If you show up and think you can work your way in by being a good guy or gal, by dressing in your own garment, there will be no place for you.

But when God calls you, and God carries you, and when God clothes you in His righteousness, then, it doesn't matter how much sin you have committed in your life, you are invited, and you are clothed appropriately.

Folks, this is why we are all here today, not one of us deserves to be here, not one of us deserves to be in the presence of God, hearing His Holy Word and receiving the body and blood of Christ.

None of us deserve to come before God's throne of grace and to confess just how sinful we are. None of us deserve to be told by God, that "I forgive you and absolve you of your sins, go in peace".

But we are here in faith, and that faith informs us, and speaks to us by the power of God's Holy Spirit, which brings us before God in faith, in humility, and fear, because we do not deserve it, but also in thanksgiving and in joy, because God's grace is given so freely. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, Through faith in your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, we have been invited to this great wedding feast which has no end. By your grace through faith, You have clothed us in the garments of righteousness and salvation, so that we may rejoice in your presence with all your saints in your heavenly kingdom. Let our lives of faith be of service to You and to one another. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.