

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 15, 2017  
Matthew 22:1-14

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### **A Feast of Hyperbole**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So. What is going on in this gospel story? Why is it, for example, that the king who represents God if this is allegorical, does what sound like horrible things to the so-called “friend” who comes to the wedding feast without the appropriate garb? Not to mention the incomprehensible behavior of the first guests or the king’s response—burning their city!

The problem is that this is not an allegory. Matthew tells us in verse one that this is a parable. With a parable, it’s most important to look for a single teaching. For this one, that seems relatively clear. God invites folks to a sumptuous wedding banquet, and yet they refuse to come. The parable seeks in a rather extreme way—hyperbole, exaggeration to make a point—to wake folks up and turn us back towards God in Christ, the one who speaks the words of the parable in Matthew’s gospel.

By extension, Jesus tells us that we are invited to this banquet. Indeed, every Sunday we are invited by the King, the ruler, to a banquet. We are all at worship because we have responded to the invitation of our “king,” our God, who invites us weekly to share in the banquet of the kingdom of God hosted by none other than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Who wouldn’t come, one might wonder, to such a glorious feast? Well, lots of folks don’t come. And, when I see things through the eyes of parables like this one, I wonder why they don’t. Perhaps it’s a sense of unworthiness rather than circumstances like those noted in the parable. Maybe folks feel too sinful.

But that’s part of the point too. It’s not about us. It’s about an offer from God to be part of something great—regardless of our personal circumstances or our individual sense of worthiness. Note well that the parable says that when those privileged folks who were invited didn’t arrive, he extended the invitation to the common folks, the sinners, those on the highways and byways. The words are “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

This parable is about our rejection of God’s gifts. It’s about our sense that we worship out of obligation rather than joyous gratitude. It’s about our self-deceptions that we can find a better life apart from the one who made us and who, in fact, knows more about us than we do about ourselves. It’s about the truth that rejection of the wedding banquet that stands before us each Sunday is tantamount to the terrible behavior of those who reject the feast in the parable.

Do you come to worship because it is your duty? I often do. Even pastors are not immune to wrong-headed ideas—the more literalist preachers would say “the wiles of the devil.” Sometimes I don’t want to get out of bed on Sunday mornings.

But nearly every time that I do, I am so glad that I did! Even if I have to lead worship rather than be more of a participant, I am always blessed by this banquet. I always learn something anew about God’s loving ways. I regularly enjoy the unexpected gifts of worship, like the interaction of our organist’s children after the children’s sermon last Sunday. I nearly always know something more about myself as I participate in the wedding feast of our Lord as my sins are brought more fully to remembrance even as they are fully forgiven and I am told to go forth without having to carry that guilt any longer. I am nearly always relieved to share my burdens with Christ and with this blessed community of Christians.

It is amazing this thing we do here. Worship is a marvelous ritual developed directly from our sacred texts and shaped by millennia into a rehearsal of just about all of the basic truths of our faith. It is an incredible thing—even if it sometimes becomes for us a routine rather than a blessing, boring rather than buoying, a duty rather than an honor.

Our Lord, in this parable speaks clearly the word of blessing and grace in the form of an invitation:

**God, the Creator of all,  
extends to you a holy invitation  
to participate in an event of cosmic significant,  
and invites your presence at the ceremony  
to be held  
this Sunday at 8:30 a. m.  
at  
St. Thomas Lutheran Church**

and at 11:00 a.m., and at literally hundreds of thousands of locations across this planet each week.

What person in their right mind would refuse such an invitation? That’s the question this parable asks.

God thanks you and me for responding today. God is glad of heart that you are here. And God has food for your soul.

Of course, this hardly looks like a banquet. Where are the roast and the potatoes and the salads and the pies? Where’s the mac and cheese? Maybe some of you know that the mac and cheese was forgotten by our caterers at our Reformation feast two Sundays ago. Our apologies to those who don’t eat meat.

But this is a banquet unlike that one or indeed any other. This is food for the spirit that is akin to the food for the body that we share around our tables at home. This food satisfies a far deeper hunger, one many would rather not admit they have but which is there nonetheless—a hunger for relatedness, deliverance, belonging, forgiveness, fellowship, purpose, love, grace, and blessing.

It stands now before us. And I say, let's dig in! But before we get on towards this feast, a bit of a story.

The first major destination for my sabbatical was Ghost Ranch, a Christian retreat center nestled in the mountains just northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico near a town called Abiquiu. It was a blessed week of reading, walking, communing with nature and nearby hills, and prayer.

Marie and I were actually struck at how secular the retreat center tends to be. Yes, there is a chapel, but there is no regular worship offering. Yes, there is a dining room, but there are no overt attempts to get folks to offer grace together.

There is instead on each table a prayer card standing up in a small metal holder. One of those prayers caught my attention for its eloquence related to Christian eating and communion. It was written by C. Eric Mount, Jr. who I later learned was an ordained Reformed pastor and a professor at Centre College in Kentucky until retiring in 2002..

The prayer could easily have been a meditation on the parable before us this morning. Here it is:

O God, you prepare a table for us, and we want to assign seats.  
 You offer a banquet, and we want to write the guest list.  
 You invite, and we make excuses.  
 You provide enough, but we want more than enough and watch others lack enough.

We consume but fail to give thanks.

We consume but fail to share the bounty.

We consume but fail to share the load.

We are offered a sacrament, but we manage to turn it into a sacrilege.

We set our own tables that you rightly overturn.

Forgive us our table manners. Turn our meals into celebrations. Turn our feasts into fellowship, Turn our consumption into communion. Turn our table fare into justice. Enable us to be the body of Christ, because we see the body of Christ in others and therefore receive the body of Christ as we commune together, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer suggests an important part of this feast—justice. When, in the parable, the king tells the servants to invite whoever they find, he means just that. All are invited. There are no exceptions.

I shared a brief video on Facebook a couple of days ago. It makes this point using another passage from Matthew. It depicts a pastor, an female African American pastor, retelling the words of our Lord. The pastor begins, and then other voices from a diversity of peoples, chime in:

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

I was sick and you looked after me.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me (this in Spanish).

I was walking home and didn't follow me; you weren't afraid of me (a Black man in a hoodie).

I was being harassed on the train and you intervened (a woman in a head scarf).

I came to this country as a refugee and you did not shut your doors (an African man).

I was wrongly murdered and you said my name.

My parents were taken by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and you came to the court with me.

The pastor continues: What you did for these, you did for me. But no matter who is in the White House, Jesus gave us clear instructions. Do you believe that? Or are we just pretending?

Powerful stuff!

Not only are all welcomed at this table. We are also called to care for all of those who come as valued parts of this holy and powerful Body of Christ.

“Go out and invite everyone you find to this wedding banquet, this great feast, this incredible gift of Jesus, the Christ, the source of every blessing, the source of love and justice, the source of life itself. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.