

Sunday: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 11, 2020

Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Title: The kingdom of heaven is like . . .

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he sat down with them and said,

Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9-10).

With Jesus, the kingdom of heaven came near to the people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, just as it has come near to all who believe today. Over the last few weeks we have included parts of the Small Catechism at the end of our bulletins. Today, the seventh petition of the Lord's prayer is included. Recently, the second petition was featured. In the explanation to this petition Luther writes:

*What does this mean?*

The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also.

*How does God's kingdom come?*

God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

Living in the now of the kingdom of heaven we give thanks to God for calling us by the gospel to be part of his family, heirs of the eternal kingdom.

The Gospel reading this morning is a kingdom of heaven parable told by Jesus. This parable reflects the now and the not yet of the heavenly kingdom. As we explore this text, we can see how it describes the people of Jesus' day, as well as the world around us today.

As Jesus continues his teaching in the Temple courtyard, the Pharisees, chief priests, and religious leaders are fuming over his parables. Jesus does not let up as he tells another kingdom of heaven parable. He begins

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. (v 2-3)

Weddings were grand events and to be invited to the wedding feast for the son of a king would be a great honor. The event would feature the finest food and wine and would be the best of places to see and be seen. This would be a place to honor the king who provides for your life by protecting you and providing opportunities for you to live and work in peace.

We shake our heads at this scenario. It is irrational to not go to the celebration. There would be free food, drinks, and entertainment. It makes no sense.

And that is precisely the point. The behavior of the invited guests, rejecting the invitation, knowing what it entailed is incomprehensible. And then to make matters worse, when the king sent the servants out to announce the beginning of the celebration, they abused and killed them.

Understandably the king responded in anger and destroyed the insolent offenders.

The Pharisees and chief priests must have been turning red with anger at this. They knew Jesus was speaking about the rejection of God's invitation to the children of Abraham to be his people. They got the point that Israel had wandered off and killed the servants of God when he sent them to call the people back. They knew that they were guilty of leading people away from the true worship of God with their focus on rules instead of on the promised Messiah. And now with the son of the king, in their presence, they were about to abuse and kill the servant of God. The wrath and ire of the Father would soon be poured out upon them.

As Jesus continues the parable, it becomes even more uncomfortable for them, if that is possible. Jesus tells all who are gathered that the wedding celebration is opened to all people. The good, the bad, and the ugly. The servants are sent out to invite anyone and everyone they meet to the feast. The kingdom of heaven is open to the Gentiles. This is a grand insult to the religious leadership in Jerusalem. Not only that, it is open to the commoner, the coarse and the criminal. All of whom are beneath consideration by the Pharisees.

However, this is good news for all who cannot trace their ancestry to Abraham. Jew and Gentile alike are now welcome at the wedding feast. Paul reflects on this inclusion in his letter to the Romans speaking of the Gentiles being like branches being grafted into the tree of life. Paul reflects this in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 3:

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (3:26-28).

This is great good news. We are heirs of the kingdom through Christ Jesus our Lord. We are the ones called to the feast from outside the original guest list. We are welcome even though we are commoners and sinners. These are the ones Jesus invites to come to him. All who are laboring and heavily burdened, calling them to come to him.

Yet in our world today, many reject the invitation of the king to come to the wedding feast. Whether they are too busy or have chased gods of human origin the true king is ignored and rejected. Many “religious leaders” have placed burdens on people and created obstacles to faith. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

It would be wonderful if the parable of Jesus ended with the inclusion of all mankind at the wedding feast, wouldn't it? If the invitation to the feast is all inclusive. Nothing to do on our part but receive the invitation and come into the celebration. Lest all who are invited become complacent, Jesus continues the parable.

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there was a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.

The appearance of one who stands out in the crowd and is ultimately cast out is a little disconcerting. What is Jesus telling his first century hearers and what does this mean for us? What does it mean NOT to have a wedding garment?

It is unlikely that there was any sort of special wedding garment required in first century Israel. There is no evidence to suggest that the garments worn to a wedding feast were anything different than, normal, clean, festive garments. We might say “church clothes” that identification leaves it pretty wide open doesn’t it.?

There is no evidence of a custom that the host would provide wedding garments for those who would be attending the feast. While it provides a way to explain the reaction of the king to the one who does not have a wedding garment on, it is merely speculation and not the basis for us to make assertions about its meaning in the context of Jesus’ parable.

In the first half of the parable those who are punished by the king are those who rejected, shamed and dishonored the king and his son. They were deemed not worthy. The guest who was not wearing the wedding garment at the feast, too, could be identified as one who was deliberately dishonoring the king and his son. Understood in this light, what does it mean then to be “not worthy?”

It appears to follow then that to be “not worthy” is to oppose, hate, and seek to destroy God’s Son. This turns the parable into an issue of Christology. The key question becomes “Who do you say that the Son of Man is?” The answer to that question is the key to what it means to lack a wedding garment. It is to oppose the claims of the Son of God and to resist his ministry of manifesting the reign of God. It is to reject Jesus and his work of salvation that has now brought him to Jerusalem to be rejected, to suffer, to be crucified and to rise from the dead. The banquet is the wedding feast that the king gives “for his son.” Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb and who respond in joyful praise and honor and submission to all that the Son is and all that he does. These will remain worthy for they receive the message of peace (10:11-13) and they follow as Jesus’ disciples who love him above everyone else (10:37-38).

Jesus ends the parable with a note of judgment (22:13). The dark ending of the parable cautions every generation of Jesus’ disciples. The fact that one has been invited to a place at the great messianic feast in its present manifestation is not some sort of guarantee or inoculation against the spiritual dangers that could harden one’s heart and slowly draw one away from a life of honoring the Son. This parable does not say that the man once wore a fitting garment and then removed it, but this possibility, for a believer then remains the warning for believers now. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 11:19-22 as he speaks of the gentiles being grafted in because of Israel’s unbelief

Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus utters the famous line, “Many are called but few are chosen.” This reinforces his message in the parable of the sower. The word of God and the invitation to the feast is spread far and wide. It is not limited by the sower’s thoughts of who will respond appropriately. Instead it is scattered to all and it is the Holy Spirit who does the work of bringing people to faith. The guest without the wedding garment reminds us of the seeds that fell on the rocks and among the weeds, as the invitation to follow Christ is received and faith grows but withers or is choked out by troubles and cares of the world. This choking out results in the rejection of the king and his son.

It is not our doing that makes us acceptable guests at the wedding feast of our Lord. It is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us. Invited to the feast by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word we receive the invitation to the wedding feast of God’s only Son, Christ our Lord.

Christ makes us worthy to attend the feast by his fulfillment of the Law’s demands for us. Through his death on the cross he welcomes us into his kingdom through the forgiveness of our sins. Christ clothes us with the robe of righteousness that covers our sins and makes us acceptable to the Father. It is Christ who sends the Holy Spirit to keep us firm in our faith. He sustains us and keeps us from rejecting the gift of grace and being cast out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is Christ who speaks us forgiven, calls us righteous, action on Jesus part, passive reception on our part.

It is Christ for you, Christ for me, Christ for all.

Amen.