

Pentecost 19A. October 15, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.’

Have you ever stood around with friends chatting about the fabulous weddings you’ve attended, or the enormous costs that have been spent – or the major or minor catastrophes that sometimes occur at weddings. We will travel great distances to honor family members and children of friends who are tying the knot.

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In the ancient near east, weddings sometimes lasted an entire week. Since travel was slow, the invitations were issued long in advance giving an approximate date for the partying to begin. Then, when everything was nearing readiness – since there were no phones -- the host would send messengers out to the guests to advise them that it was time to embark on their journeys.

Here’s where our Gospel story begins. It was not easy to say, “the Gospel of the Lord” after reading this story which seems more frightening than comforting, so we have to dig deep and work hard to find meaning in it for

us today. We err on the side of seeking the good news in this story rather than the bad.

The compilers of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels both remembered to include this story, but they tell it very differently. You might like to look at the Matthew version on your bulletin while I read you Luke's version. (Luke 14:16-30)

Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

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The same basic points are made by both Matthew and Luke: when some reject the invitation to the dinner, many others are invited to take their places. Those who reject will not taste the dinner; strangers – poor and sick – will. But as you have heard, Luke makes the point much more gently – without the intense anger and violence of Matthew's version.

Don't you wish you could have heard Jesus' exact words – not what people remembered and passed down 40 to 70 years later!?

Why the over-the-top violence in Matthew's story that is missing in Luke's? Matthew's guests kill the king's messengers, the king kills the rejecting guests and destroys their city; later he throws out a poorly-dressed guest. Meanwhile presumably the fatted calves are getting cold and the flowers are wilting on the banquet table.

Whereas Luke talks of a “man” giving a “dinner,” Matthew talks of a “king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” No simple dinner, this, but a wedding banquet. We all know the heightened significance of a wedding for a prince! Invitations were a real honor; guests would pledge their loyalty to the king, express their hopes for an heir, and give honor to the prince and his new family. Not attending would be treason!

Matthew presumes God to be the king, Jesus to be the prince, the banquet to be the acceptance of Jesus as Lord.

Matthew is writing to fellow-Jews who are struggling with how to justify their faith in Christ while their friends and relatives reject Jesus as the Messiah. It’s a family feud one to two generations after Jesus’ life. This painful story has been used over the centuries to justify the divisions between Jews and Christians.

That’s not where we are today.

We are not minority religions seeking to make sense of our rejection by society, although it often feels that way. Let’s face it: some of our family members and friends reject our beliefs. For many of you, it’s painful to watch a grandchild grow up without ever being taken to Sunday School. It’s hard to attend worship week after week without our partner or children joining us. Norman Rockwell portrayed children sweetly singing in church with their mother; a piece of nostalgia we may long for but not the reality for many of us today.

Yet, we love these family members and friends dearly. They deserve our best efforts. The high road is to trust God enough to pray for our loved ones rather than condemning them, simply and quietly to model to our grandchildren our faithfulness to Jesus rather than lecturing them, and to care and support, respect and seek to understand.

The king – or the “man giving a dinner” in Luke’s version – does do some marvelous things: he prepares a banquet and he invites EVERYONE to his feast. That’s the grace here. That’s God’s expansive love and inclusiveness.

The marriage feast of the Son goes on in spite of the horror and violence of the crucifixion – which would occur just a few days after Jesus tells this

story. The marriage feast goes on. Easter morning testifies to that! And Matthew's and Luke's early church communities testify to that. This congregation testifies to that. Our personal love and care for ALL people whom we encounter testify to that – and that includes those who reject us and our beliefs.

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What do we make of that poor guy at the end of the story who got thrown out of the wedding? And what about that last line where “many are called but few are chosen?” Look at the cartoon^[1] on page 9 of your worship folder. Yes, “we’re not exactly sure” what that necessary wedding outfit symbolizes.

Some will say it's our Baptismal robe, it's Jesus' righteousness poured over us to forgive and hide our sins and make us right before God. My grandparents sang the old German hymn verse, (“Christi Blut und Gerechtigkeit, das ist mein Schmuck und Ehrenkleid.”) “Jesus, thy blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress.” Covered by this garment, we can stand before God as Jesus' disciples. That's a comfort.

In ancient weddings, as today, people – even those called from the highways and by-ways – were expected to wear good, at least clean, clothes. No matter how poor, you could rinse out your tunic! Some scholars speak of the host offering wedding garments to all the guests when they arrived – especially if they traveled a distance.

The man not wearing the clean clothes is a guest who is not really entering into the joy of the wedding, neither honoring the bride and groom, nor the host. It's as if the father of the bride happily rented tuxedos for the groomsmen but one of them showed up in his jeans and t-shirt. Sorry. The father of the bride would have him shown out and excluded. But, truth be told, the man in the jeans would have already excluded himself by his behavior.

He was called but couldn't be chosen because he excluded himself from the celebration.

The cartoon character in our bulletin “gets it.” He throws up his hands and cries, “Lord, have mercy!” and his buddy responds, “Oh, that part we know.” Yes, we do. We DO know and rely on God's mercy.

Let the party begin today. Dance in joy around the son and heir. The Baptismal wedding garments are there for everyone. The food is ample and delicious. The wine Jesus blesses with his promises is rich and ready for us right here this morning. And we all would be surprised – I think – if we could see who around this globe we call earth is gathered at Jesus' table – and who gathers in their hearts! Thank God we can't judge anyone's hearts but our own. God judges all hearts with mercy and that's enough for any of us! Amen.