

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California  
**The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost**  
October 13, AD 2002

*Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel*

**Matthew 22:1-14**

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.*

<sup>4</sup> *"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'*

<sup>5</sup> *"But they paid no attention and went off-- one to his field, another to his business. <sup>6</sup> The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.*

<sup>8</sup> *"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. <sup>9</sup> Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' <sup>10</sup> So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

<sup>11</sup> *"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup> 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.*

<sup>13</sup> *"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

<sup>14</sup> *"For many are invited, but few are chosen." (NIV)*

Christian author Philip Yancey<sup>1</sup> recounts an event reported in the *Boston Globe* in June 1990, an account of an unusual wedding banquet.

A woman and her fiancé chose the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston as the site of their wedding banquet. The two visited the hotel to make arrangement. They sampled menu items, selected the china pattern on which the food would be served, and selected decorations. They both had expensive tastes; the bill came to \$13,000. They wrote a check for half that amount and left it as a deposit.

Months later, though, just as the couple was ready to mail the wedding invitations, the groom-to-be got cold feet. "This is a really big commitment. Could we wait a little while?"

The bride-to-be didn't want to wait. So she angrily marched down to the Hyatt to cancel the reservations for the banquet. The events manager at the hotel was very compassionate. "Honey," she said, "the same thing happened to me once." But, the manager told the woman, only \$1300 of her deposit could be refunded. Two options remained. She could forfeit the remainder of the deposit she had paid, or she could go ahead with the banquet.

The jilted bride began to think about it. More and more, she started to like the wild idea of going ahead with the banquet. It wouldn't be a wedding banquet, of course, but just a huge party. You see, ten years earlier, she had found herself homeless. In the time since, she had managed to

find a good job, get back on her feet, and become financially well off. She liked the idea of inviting everyone who was down-and-out in Boston to come and enjoy a night on the town, on her.

And so it was. In June 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted an unusual banquet. The hostess changed the menu, in honor of her ex-fiance, to boneless chicken. Then she sent open invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters throughout the area. And they came. Senior citizens on fixed incomes hobbled in on crutches. Drug addicts, people from the street and homeless people came in and dined on chicken cordon bleu served on fine china. They drank expensive champagne from crystal flutes and danced long into the night. (Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997., pages 48f.)

The story Jesus tells (which predates the *Boston Globe's* one by over 1900 years) is similar: a king throws a lavish wedding banquet for his son. The feast is darkened, however, by the refusal of the invited guests to come. Joy returns when the king, in an act of unexpected generosity, invites people from the streets to come and feast. But Jesus' parable ends with a portentous wrinkle: the king throws out a man who insists on coming to the feast on his own terms.

What is Jesus telling us with this story? He's telling us most of all about the lavish grace of our Father in heaven and his invitation to enjoy it. And at the same time, he's giving us a warning about ignoring and rejecting that invitation. We could summarize Jesus' parable in this way:

**Come to the Feast!**

In God's time

On God's terms

**Come to the feast in God's time**

The target of this parable was the same as the target of the parable we heard last week, the story about the landowner who rented his vineyard to some tenant farmers, who then rejected his authority and rebelled against him. That parable and this one were spoken against the people of Israel who had rejected Jesus instead of believing that he was the Christ.

These were the people who had been invited to feast on the rich fare of God's love. For hundreds of years they had been invited to take part. Time after time, God let them know that from their bloodline, someone was coming who would finally do what God had promised to do in the beginning: to swallow up death forever, to remove the death shroud of guilt that covered all nations. This would happen, of course, through Jesus, God's Son made flesh. An example of this invitation was our First Lesson today (Isaiah 25:6-9). There God pictures what he would do through Jesus as a banquet, a gourmet meal of the richest food and the finest wine. The people of Israel knew this time was coming, when God's table would be fully spread for all of them to enjoy. And they were the invited guests!

Then, when the time had fully come, God sent his Son. Jesus came to a world full of death, and he brought life. He came as the substitute for every person, ready to live a life the way it should be lived—fully dependent on God, faithful and true to him—a life that each of us has failed to live. And Jesus came to take our guilt and shame on himself, to pay for our crimes in full, to die our death. What's more, Jesus came to do what God had foretold through Isaiah, to swallow up death forever. And he did, by dying and then returning to life on the third day after his death. When Jesus spoke these words, just a few days before his crucifixion, it was as good as done—the feast was spread! Life was won! Death was about to be swallowed up in victory!

And no one cared.

Well, a few did. But it was a surprisingly low number. Jesus didn't fit the bill in the minds of most of his countrymen. Few were looking for what Jesus was—a Savior from the power of death and sin. They instead sought a forceful field general. They ignored the signs, the miracles done by Jesus that showed that he was the one who was bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. The banquet was ready! Jesus was there in the flesh, ready to be believed in. But just like the people in the story, most of those who had been invited did not come to the feast.

Now, this parable was spoken to the people of Jerusalem, and it was aimed primarily at them. But think about it. If these people, who for centuries had been hearing about the coming Savior and the feast for their souls he would provide—if these people could so coolly turn away from Jesus, couldn't we also?

One of the most disconcerting—even *scary*—aspects of this parable was what kept the invited guests from attending. Do you remember how the story goes? When the invited guests are told, "The feast is ready! Come to the feast!" they casually decline the offer. Then they go back to business as usual, one man to the field he farmed, another to his business. Does this strike you? It wasn't some cataclysmic event that kept these people away from the feast, it was the ordinary things of their lives! Can we be tempted, too, to ignore Jesus, not just by big things but by the combination of little things every day? Often that's what distracts us from Jesus, from enjoying the feast that's found only in him. No one else can make us right with God. Nothing else can give us real peace with God. No one else can extend our lives into eternity. No one else can give meaning to our existence the way Jesus can. Yet we pay so much attention to all the things around us and so little to Jesus.

In the story, carelessness and disinterest weren't the only things that the king's servants encountered when calling the guests to the banquet. They also met open hostility. Jesus, just a few days after speaking this parable, would experience that rage. He would be killed. In the story, the king sent his army to destroy those who killed his servants. About forty years after Jesus was crucified, Roman armies came in and destroyed Jerusalem.

But regardless of the way they rejected Jesus—either by shrugging him off or by openly denouncing him—the result was the same. These people did not enjoy the feast that had been prepared for them.

Nevertheless, God countered their persistent rejection with persistent grace. In Jesus' story, the king commands his servants to go out into the "highways and hedges", the street corners, to find anyone they can. These raggedy souls would be the ones seated at the grand banquet.

The people to whom Jesus was speaking got the message. God would turn away from them and invite non-Israelites to enjoy his banquet. Those first invited would miss out.

We in this room benefit from the king's generosity. We now find ourselves invited by God himself to enjoy the richest of fare. We, who are no more inclined by nature to follow Jesus than anyone else is—we are invited to dine at the table of the almighty. What happened to those homeless people in Boston has happened to us. Only this feast is not just for one night. The feast of God will last forever.

So what should we do when God invites us to partake? Accept his invitation! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ! When? What does the parable tell us? When should we believe in Jesus and feast on God's grace? As soon as we're invited! As the Bible says, "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2) Come to the feast—in God's time.

### **Come to the feast on God's terms**

The other part of Jesus' story fast-forwards us to the wedding banquet, now underway. The king takes a look at the guests feasting on his generosity. And as he does, he notices something strange. One of the guests does not have wedding attire.

Now, we should realize that the king, who was throwing this banquet, would have provided clothes for these guests to wear. The man without the wedding clothes—he wanted to have things his way. Do you see? He wanted to enjoy the banquet, but on his terms, not the king's.

The king asks him why he doesn't have the proper attire. The man is speechless. He has no defense. The king orders him thrown out into the outermost darkness.

There was a warning for Jesus' first listeners here: "Listen to God. He wants to freely give you forgiveness, life, an eternity in heaven. That's why he's given you Jesus. Believe in him. Be clothed in him. Come to the feast on God's terms."

Many of them, however, did not. They instead rejected Jesus and wanted to come to God on their own terms.

God has provided us with clothes fit for his heavenly banquet. He has robed us in Jesus. He has covered our sin with the perfect life of his only Son. Do you remember how Paul once phrased it? *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* (Galatians 3:26,27) Covered with Jesus, we are dressed in just the right outfit to be in the presence of God himself.

In fact, covered with the righteousness of Jesus is the only way we can stand in the presence of God. He is holy, and so for us to be near him we must have our sins taken away. We must have a perfect life to call our own. Clothed in Jesus, we have exactly that.

Yet to us Americans, there's something offensive about this part of the story. "The man was kicked out into the darkness just because he had the wrong clothes on? Shouldn't he have been free to wear whatever he wanted?" We don't like God telling us the way things are going to be. We'd rather establish our own terms. "God, this is America! People have choices here. We are a pluralistic society. We can all believe different things if we want to, and we can still be friends with you, right?"

And God says, "Sure. Believe whatever you want. But unless you believe in Jesus, unless you are robed in him, you ain't comin' to my party! You can take off the garment of Jesus' perfect righteousness—the one I gave you for free when you were baptized, remember?—and put on something else. But you won't be able to enter the feast. Instead you'll go outside, into the darkness of hell."

Richard Fairchild tells a story about a fisherman who was discontent. He lived on the banks of a river. One day, the fisherman was walking along the banks, lamenting how hard his life was. His foot kicked a small leather pouch. He picked it up. It seemed to be filled with little stones. Absentmindedly, the man sat down on the riverbank, complaining out loud and throwing the stones into the river. "If only I were a rich man," he said, "then I could have a large house." He threw a stone. "If only I had more money, then I could have servants and fine food and fine wine." He threw a stone. He kept doing this until there was one stone left. The man uttered another complaint and was about to throw the last stone. But he glanced at it, and noticed something about it. It was gleaming. It was a precious gemstone. Not knowing what he had, the man had thrown away the riches he was longing for.

The message to us in this parable is clear: God has prepared a feast for us. He has given us forgiveness of sins, eternal life in his presence, a rescue from the power of evil—all for free!

When he invites us to enjoy it, he doesn't want us to wait to accept his invitation. And he doesn't want to argue with us about the terms on which we come. Just come. Come to the feast. Believe in Jesus Christ, and your soul will dine on the richest of fare, forever.

Amen.