

Twenty-First Sunday of Pentecost
October 9, 2005
Matthew 22:1-14

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

God Requests the Honor of Your Presence

1. He has prepared a wedding banquet
2. He issues repeated invitations
3. He provides the proper attire

^{NIV} Matthew 22:1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. ⁴ "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.'⁵ "But they paid no attention and went off-- one to his field, another to his business. ⁶ The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸ "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹ Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹² 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. ¹³ "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'¹⁴ "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Fellow Subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven,

Would you like one more indication that good manners are in decline? Experts in etiquette say that the appropriate response to a formal invitation used to be a handwritten, formal letter of reply. Nowadays, most formal invitations include response cards, a relatively recent innovation. And many invitations include the notation "R.S.V.P," an abbreviation for the French phrase, "Respond, please." About that "R.S.V.P." notation, Miss Manners, Judith Martin, has said, "(This) is a polite way of reminding people of something they should already know: if you

receive an invitation, you should reply." But almost anyone who has planned a wedding or a birthday party or any other kind of gathering can tell you that many people simply don't reply.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear a parable about a king who extended invitations to attend a wedding banquet for his son. Though the host is a king—and though it's apparent that the king in the parable is God—his invitations aren't always met with a prompt and joyful, "Yes, I'd be honored to attend." In fact, God's invitations to the wedding banquet of his Son are met with apathy and even violence.

This morning Jesus speaks this parable for our benefit as people whose names are on his guest list. **God Requests the Honor of Our Presence.** We see in this parable 1) that God has prepared a wedding banquet for his Son, 2) that God issues repeated invitations to this wedding feast, and 3) God even provides those who attend this banquet with the proper attire.

1. He has prepared a wedding banquet

Jesus begins this parable by saying, "*The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet...*" "The kingdom of heaven" is another name for God's kingdom, that kingdom that we become subjects in when the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to bring us to faith in Jesus. With this parable, Jesus gives us some insight into the coming of God's kingdom.

In the parable we hear of a king who has planned a wedding banquet. His son is getting married and he wants to share the joy of this occasion. We should realize right away that the setting of this parable is no accident. The Bible speaks frequently of Jesus Christ as the heavenly bridegroom and of the Holy Christian Church as his bride. John the Baptist spoke this way. After he had done his work of preparing the way for the Lord, he said, "**The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.**" (John 3:29) When Jesus came to begin his public ministry, John the Baptist saw the heavenly Bridegroom coming to meet his bride. And with that he stepped aside and let Jesus have the spotlight. In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul, as he speaks to husbands and wives, portrays Jesus' love for his bride, the Church, as a model for Christian husbands. He says, "**Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**" The bride and bridegroom analogy is God's way of expressing the intimate relationship that exists between Jesus and his Church.

Some of you parents out there can attest that weddings can be expensive. The word is that the average cost of a wedding nowadays is more than \$26,000. (That includes everything: rings, dress, tuxedos, musicians, honoraria, rehearsal dinner, reception, --everything.) But even that amount becomes insignificant when compared with what God spent in preparing the wedding banquet to which he's invited us. This is a lavish feast of fattened cattle and oxen. This is the feast that cost God the life of his dear Son, as Jesus shed his precious blood for our sins.

You've seen the kind of scramble that takes place when a celebrity wedding is in the works. Pictures of such weddings fetch thousands of dollars and invitations are regarded as precious baubles. The royal wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in the early 1980s is still regarded as the wedding of the century. Millions watched the wedding on television, all the while wishing they could be there. How strange, then, that the king in our parable has difficulty filling his banquet hall. It's certainly not for want of invitations. The king issues repeated invitations.

2. He issues repeated invitations

It says here, *"He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused."* The first invitation had already been sent. These follow-up invitations were made in person by the king's servants. The reaction was not what had been hoped, but the king persisted. *"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. But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business.'" They had previous commitments, though those commitments don't sound important: work and business. (This is where the reader of the parable has to say to himself, "How strange! That's not usually the response to an invitation to a royal wedding!) But the next verse is stranger still: "The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them."* The apathy turned to deadly violence.

The invitations in this parable represent the invitations made by the prophets of God, like Isaiah. It was Isaiah who, at the beginning of his prophecy, voiced God's invitation to the people of Israel, **"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.'"** Later, God would declare through Isaiah, **"I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist."** Then he would invite, **"Return to me, for I have redeemed you."** (44:22) Time and again God spoke like that through Isaiah and the rest of the prophets, calling his people to turn from their sins and live. Sadly, too often the response was just apathy. And sometimes it was violence. Isaiah, according to tradition, was

sawed in two for his prophetic efforts. Nor were these invitations just a feature of the Old Testament era. John the Baptist proclaimed, "**Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**" That was an invitation to believe in God's spotless Lamb. And Jesus tenderly invited, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" (Matt. 11:28) But in all too many cases, these efforts to gather Jerusalem's children together like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings were met with rejection. "**You were not willing,**" Jesus said of Jerusalem.

Here's where we see that there's a limit to God's patience. The king in the parable becomes enraged. "*He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.*" That did happen to the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., when the Roman army sacked Jerusalem and burned it to the ground.

There are two things that hearing of these repeated invitations should cause us to do. The first is to examine ourselves. Do we see in ourselves the signs of apathy when it comes to God's gracious invitation? Have we grown tired of hearing of his mercy? Are we no longer all that delighted at the prospect of a heavenly banquet? Then it's time to repent of our apathy, to conduct with the help of God's law a review of our many reasons for needing a Savior, so that the gospel invitation to the heavenly wedding banquet becomes again the sweet news that it really is. And the second thing this parable might well cause us to do is to be renewed in our sense of the urgency of inviting those still outside the kingdom to heed the invitation. There still is room! There still is time! But now is the time, not later. The Bible says, "**Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.**" (2 Cor. 6:2b)

Amazingly, the king sends out still another invitation. He says, "*The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.*" This is our invitation. We Gentiles were the ones standing on the street corners. God wants his house to be filled. He wants all people to be saved. And, finally, his wedding hall is filled with guests.

What will I wear to the wedding? Even in casual California, not just the members of the wedding party but also the guests dress up for a wedding. It might even be an occasion for buying new clothes. It was a little different in the case of some royal weddings in ancient times. In some cases, the host would not only provide the food for the banquet, but he would also provide appropriate attire for the guests. It's this custom that we should keep in mind as we read the last verses of this section. "*But when the king came into see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.*"

3. He provides the proper attire

This was not a come-as-you-are wedding banquet. Proper dress was required. But not to worry: the host was happy to supply the proper attire. That's also the case with the heavenly banquet. God requires that for admission to his banquet we be decked out in the spotless linen of perfect righteousness. And, of course, none of us has such attire. We're beggars. We've got nothing presentable. **"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags,"** the Bible says (Is. 64:6) But God supplies the attire that he requires. He gave it to us when we were baptized. St. Paul says, **"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."** (Gal. 3:27) Through faith in Jesus we **"have washed (our) robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."** (Rev. 7:14)

Now there was one fellow who declined the offer of free wedding clothes. He preferred to come to the banquet in his own clothes. But the king was not impressed by this man's exhibition of individuality. He had him bound hand and foot and thrown outside into the darkness. His refusal to wear the wedding garments was rank ingratitude and an insult to the host.

This type of wedding banquet crasher isn't uncommon. It happens every time someone expects to be able to enter heaven on his own merits. When the answer to "Why should God let you into heaven?" is, "Because I've tried my best," or "Because I've been a good person" you know immediately that you're dealing with a wedding banquet crasher. That person is choosing to wear the spotted garment of his own righteousness rather than the clean linen that Jesus gives to those who trust in him. It's like wearing the clothes you wore to mow the lawn to a black tie dinner. Far better to wear what God has freely given us: the robes of Christ's righteousness. Dressed that way, we'll stand bold and unashamed on the day that the heavenly Bridegroom comes to take his bride to heaven.

This parable of the wedding banquet is both cautionary and comforting. The caution is sounded lest we, like so many others, turn a deaf ear to the God's gracious invitation as he requests the honor of our presence at the heavenly wedding banquet—or begin to think that we will be welcome there dressed in the soiled garments of human righteousness. The comfort comes in knowing that as people who trust in Jesus, we have already sent our R.S.V.P.s. And as believers in Jesus we are already properly attired. With the prophet Isaiah we can rejoice, **"I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness."** Amen.