

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 15, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 22:1-14

“Consecrated Stewards: Come to the Feast”

You are invited!

Along with the fall season, we've been going for a few weeks now in our redesigned Confirmation program here at St. John's. We start our sessions with an icebreaker activity. We opened our last one by throwing around a large, inflatable “conversation ball.” You have to follow the instructions that are printed under your thumb when you catch the ball, answering a question or telling a story. One question that came up went something like, “You get to meet your favorite band. What would you talk about?” If you don't have a favorite band, how about a favorite performer, or actor, or artist, or public figure? Who's someone like that with whom you'd like to spend some unhurried time?

Let's say that your favorite band (or artist) has invited you to come and have a meal with them, a proper sit-down meal that could last for hours, at a place that has food that you'd like to eat. You don't have to bring anything to contribute to the meal – this isn't going to be a potluck experience. Leave your wallet at home, too, because they're going to cover the bill. They're even going to send a driver to pick you up and take you home. Sound good?

So why wouldn't you go? Do you already have too many appointments on your calendar? Feeling too tired to go out? This is a chance to experience something that's significantly different from your day-to-day life, something that you are never going to get another chance to do. Why would you ever pass up an invitation such as this?

That special invitation from a significant figure in your life can help frame the parable that Jesus is telling the religious leaders of his day here in Matthew 22. This parable opens with an invitation to a wedding feast. This is something different from one that might come from distant relatives, coworkers, or even friends: the king's own son is getting married. This is going to be an epic celebration, one for the ages. Nobody in their right mind would miss out on the chance to be there, to join in the celebration. So when Jesus says that the invitees reject the king's invitation, that's like crazy talk! Who would pass up the opportunity to be there for the biggest party that the nation has ever seen, let alone turn down the king? You wouldn't just be taking a pass on the celebration, you'd be insulting the king. But look at what the king does in Jesus' parable: he sends those same people that rejected him another invitation! When they disregard the second invitation and even kill the king's messengers, however, they bring down the king's wrath upon themselves.

The religious leaders were rejecting the invitation that God sent them to be a part of His Son's celebration; they were also rejecting God's Son who stood before them. But God's grace wouldn't be stopped, and so His invitation would go out to other people, people who the religious leaders couldn't imagine as being worthy to be a part of God's kingdom: the Gentiles, people who didn't descend from the family line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The King's messengers would go out and invite more and more people to take part in the wedding feast, where they'd find welcome and abundance beyond anything that they had any right to enjoy. The Father of the bridegroom wants everyone to be a part of the celebration that He has prepared.

In our Confirmation session this week, we talked a bit about the Third Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” Luther's explanation of this commandment states, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” What would keep you away from gathering with God's people on the Lord's day each week to receive His gifts? Our culture places little value on corporate worship. Imagine if those who were invited in Jesus' parable said, “I've got a game to go to, or “I'm going out to brunch,” or any of the other dozens of reasons that people offer to explain away why they're not regularly meeting together with their fellow Christians. Our Lord wants to spend time with you in His Word proclaimed and sacraments freely given.

It doesn't matter who you are: **you are invited.** God has prepared an abundance of great gifts for you to enjoy at the wedding feast of His Son, Jesus, that we get to share together as His Church. God welcomes you in, regardless of how good or bad you think you've been. You're *not* good enough. Neither am I. But you've got a King who sent out His messengers to invite you in, all the same. In the Church, the holy bride of Christ, you and I are gathered together to receive God's gifts and to carry them out into our world.

It's not free. The King's feast that we get to enjoy, living in a restored relationship with God and each other, comes at a cost. Jesus, the bridegroom, gave himself for his bride, the Church. He lived for you. He suffered and died for you. He rose for you. He gives you his righteousness, his standing before the Father, so that you could be a part of his family. In the description of the great feast from Isaiah 25, we heard the great gift that comes to us through Jesus: "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken." God even provides the garment for the feast.

That's the second part of Jesus' parable here in the Gospel account, one that might sound sort of odd. The wedding feast is underway, the banquet hall filled with guests, and the king comes in to spend time with them. One of the guests stands out because he's not wearing a wedding garment. At a big wedding feast like this one, a king would often provide special clothing for his guests as part of the celebration. So, if a guest comes in without the clothing, that guest is disrespecting the king and his generosity. The guest has disparaged the king's gift, effectively saying that he didn't need or want it, insulting the host. In short: not a good way to go. Lacking the proper attire, the guest gets booted out of the celebration.

You are invited to the king's feast, God's banquet celebration of life with Him. You are welcome to come and enjoy the gifts that Jesus won for you with his life and death and resurrection. Your King has given you the robe of Jesus' righteousness which covers all your faults and failings and imperfections. Don't disparage these great gifts. Don't neglect the invitation to the feast.

Over these weeks of our congregation's Consecrated Stewards emphasis, we're celebrating some of the varied ministries that are going on here at St. John's. Think about these ministries in the context of the wedding feast. Each of them is like a wedding gift: a gift that the host is giving to the guests and, through them, to the world at large. Jesus is blessing us in his Church and the world around us. If you've been a part of any of the ministries we've highlighted – or truly, any of the ministries of the Church – think about how our Lord has been at work to give great gifts to you and through you as you serve in His Name. If you haven't yet been intentionally involved in any of the servant ministries of our congregation, consider taking a baby step into doing so. See what God is doing to welcome all people to the feast He has prepared.

Next week, we'll be gathering together for Consecration Sunday, the high point of the Consecrated Stewards experience. Please plan to be here and, if you are able, come to join in the celebration luncheon that will follow next Sunday morning's worship services. Pray for our congregation, for the people and ministries of St. John's as an outpost of God's banquet hall. Pray for God's guidance as we plan our commitment response on Consecration Sunday and for our life together in the year ahead.

You are invited! Come to the feast!

Amen.