

October 15, 2023 – Isaiah 25:6-9 & Matthew 22:1-14

This past week, I attended the Missouri District All Church Workers Conference down at the lake. And on the second night of the conference, something rather amusing happened. We were gathered for a huge banquet. Over 600 pastors, teachers, DCE's, deaconesses, and the like shoulder-to-shoulder in a conference room to enjoy a fine meal of pork loin and strip steaks. A wonderful meal.

But before we began, President Hagan came to the microphone. And he mentioned how these banquets usually had some form of entertainment at them. But that it's really difficult to come up with entertainment for a group such as this. And so, instead, they had decided to provide entertainment in the form of the two bottles sitting on every table.

And that was when I noticed the bottles of moscato and cabernet in front of me. And the entire room, all 600+ church workers, burst into applause as every person there expressed their appreciation for the entertainment that the district office had provided.

Because, you see, we had just finished a very long day of seminars, discussing some serious and occasionally some very sad topics. After a day like that, we didn't need another formal meeting. We needed a party. And a simple bottle of wine was all it took to take this formal event and turn it into an occasion for joy and fellowship and laughter.

Everybody loves a party. And it is a party that we hear about in our Gospel lesson today. The person throwing this party is a king. Who has money to burn. And he is throwing this party for his son and his new daughter-in-law. To celebrate their marriage. And it is supposed to be an occasion of joy and fellowship and laughter, filled with wine and food.

And everything is going great until the day of the party. When no one shows up. A huge guest list. A massive celebration. A party to end all parties. And not a single person arrives.

The king is dumbfounded. There's no reason to insult him this way. There's no reason to reject his generosity in throwing this reception. So he sends servants out to remind the guests of the wedding day. Maybe they just lost the invitation. Maybe they forgot what day it was.

But the servants are rejected too. Many of the wedding guests would rather go about their daily routine than come to this huge celebration. The rest are inexplicably hostile to the servants. Some even murder the king's messengers when they arrive. Why? Everybody loves a party!

Well, that's true. But the problem these guests had wasn't with the party. The problem they had was with the person throwing the party. Because the guests didn't like to be reminded that there was a king at all. They may have been invited to the wedding, but they were really rebels, bent on setting themselves up as their own rulers. And the king's generous invitation only served to remind them of how powerful he was, how weak they were, and how futile their efforts were. So they used what meager strength they had to abuse and kill the king's servants instead.

The king was furious, of course. Furious at those who thought so little of his invitation. Furious at those who killed his servants in cold blood. The murderers he had executed. And as for guests to the wedding banquet, he filled it people who hadn't previously been invited.

The king's closest friends and noblemen had ignored and betrayed him, so he brought in commoners and peasants. Criminals and prostitutes. Anyone and everyone from all over the land could come. The "by invitation only" party became an open house where everyone could attend.

As long as they were dressed for it. You were still going to a wedding reception, after all. The king, in his generosity, may have opened his doors to everyone. But you still needed to show some respect. This is the king's son who's getting married. You don't just show up in jeans and a t-shirt. And someone found that out the hard way.

So, to ask the eternal Lutheran question, what does this mean? Well, in one sense, this parable has very little to do with us. And in another sense, it has everything to do with us. Because this parable starts out as a condemnation of the Jewish leaders.

They are the guests who were first invited to the wedding. Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Isaiah spoke of this same wedding banquet. A time when God would show such compassion and generosity for his people that it would be like being given a huge feast of rich food and aged wine. A time when death would be swallowed up forever. And there would never be a reason to cry ever again. A time of salvation, brought about by the death, resurrection, and ultimately, the second coming, of Jesus Christ.

And Isaiah tells the Israelites that they have one job to do until that day comes: wait. *"It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'"*

That's all they need to do. Wait for the Lord, and he will give them everything they could ever want. He will throw a party to end all parties. And they will be invited as his guests.

And Jesus is telling them in this parable, "Look, the wedding banquet is here. The time has come. But you didn't wait for it. You gave up. You let the things of this world distract you. You let your own sinfulness and pride convince you that the king did not exist. And when he sent his servants to tell you otherwise. When he sent his own son to tell you otherwise. You killed them, rather than give up your delusions of grandeur."

And so others will be invited to the banquet. Us. Gentiles. Sinners. People who have no relationship with the king except his gracious invitation. People who don't deserve to attend a royal feast, but joyfully show up nonetheless. People who were strangers to the king and his son, but are treated as family and friends anyway.

We get to attend the feast because the Jewish authorities chose not to. We get to attend because God, in his mercy, made this feast for "all peoples." He has removed the veil from "all nations." And He has wiped the tears from "all faces." Just as he promised in Isaiah. He has made this a party not just for the Jews, but for everyone who hears the king's call. Everyone who hears the good news of God's salvation through His Son.

And yet, though everyone is invited, not everyone can attend. Because you can't just show up to a royal wedding in jeans and a t-shirt. You have to have a wedding garment. And none of us has one.

Just as that man in the parable didn't. But notice something interesting. The king calls this man a friend. And he asks him how he got in without a garment. But the man says nothing. Nothing. This is a king who has shown amazing generosity. A king who has opened his home to his guests. Who has called this man a friend. And he encourages this man to explain himself. To give him some reason to let him stay.

He gives him a perfect opportunity to say, "I'm here because you invited me." Or, "I'm sorry, let me go home and change." Or, maybe best yet, "I want to properly dressed, but I have no suitable wedding garment. Do you have something I could borrow? Something I could have?" He could have said anything that showed some level of respect or understanding. But he says nothing. And he's thrown out of the banquet.

He's rejected from the Kingdom of God. Not because he wasn't invited. But because he wasn't clothed. Clothed in Christ's righteousness. He wasn't baptized in Christ's death and resurrection. He wasn't made clean by water and the spirit. He wasn't taught by the Word of God.

Many are called, but few are chosen. All are called, in fact. All peoples. All nations. All faces. But few actually attend the banquet. Not because they weren't invited, but because they weren't dressed.

And that's what's important for us. It's important for us to know that our place at the banquet is secure. But it's also important for us to know that there are those for whom Christ died and rose again who still will spend eternity in the outer darkness.

People who were invited to the banquet. People whom God desperately desires to save. And yet, without a wedding garment – without Christ's righteousness covering over their sin – they will still die and go to a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's sad. Because they're only there because they were speechless at the day of judgement. They're only there because they didn't know that the God who is generous enough to invite them is also generous enough to clothe them. And I pray that that thought motivates you to tell them about the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And about a baptism that covers over a multitude of sins.

But it doesn't change our future. It doesn't change our security. Though we were not worthy, we have a seat at the wedding banquet of our Lord. Though we were covered in the filth of our sin, Christ has cleansed us with his blood and clothed us with his goodness. The feast of rich food and aged wine is ours for the taking at the altar of our God. And we receive a foretaste of that great feast at our own altar this very day.

Where we eat the rich, life-giving food of heaven under simple bread and wine. And where, as St Paul says and we affirm in our liturgy, as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Until he comes and takes us to the wedding banquet of the lamb – a party to end all parties – in his kingdom that will never end. Amen.