



20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2026

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Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

“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. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

“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.’

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Fear. We Lutherans don't like to deal with these fearsome texts. We would rather discount them, explain them away as Matthew's word, not Jesus', or someone later addition. But I believe this is *our book*, all of it, troublesome as it is, unsettling, uncomfortable, here for us to wrestle with, chew on, and ignoring texts like these leaves

our understanding of God pallid, two-dimensional, saccharine. Parables are sometimes the worst offenders, designed to surprise and confuse and make us ask questions, not simple morality tales like we might want. So let's take a big bite of this one, gnaw on it a little, and see what we can come up with.

This is the third parable in a series—we've been reading them for three Sundays in a row, you can be forgiven for wishing to move on—Jesus is still in the temple in the week before Passover, with his crowd of admirers around him, and hovering at the back, with crossed arms and furrowed brows, are the religious leaders, and Jesus is poking, endlessly poking at them and the establishment.

But we can't skip this one, because it's the wildest of them all, and it has a twist at the end, so hold on tight. By now Jesus has his audience in the palm of his hand—you can almost hear them gasp as he tells this latest, craziest story. "A king gave a party to celebrate the wedding of his son, and nobody came!"

Gasp! How dare they not show up to the king's feast!

"So he sent a second group of servants with a mouth-watering menu list to tempt them, again inviting them to come, but they were too busy!"

How could you be too busy to come to a feast! Fatted calves?! I want to come!

"Even though they were too busy, they found the time to insult the servants and even killed some of them."

What? They were just messengers! How dare they kill the king's servants!

"The king was angry and sent his troops out and burnt their city."

Wait, what? I know they were murderers, but killing their families too? That seems a little harsh. Is this a tyrant?

"Then the king, whose food was waiting..."

Isn't the meat a little over-cooked by now?

"...sent more servants out onto the streets to invite everybody, the good and the bad, in to the banquet."

You mean criminals and street people and foreigners at a king's feast? Doesn't he have any self-respect?

"When the king came into the hall, he saw a man not wearing wedding garb, and he had his servants bind his hands and feet and cast him into outer darkness."

Hmm. Also harsh. I'm sure this is a tyrant.

"For many are called, but few are chosen."

Oh, I see what he's saying. I'm pretty sure I'm one of the few and those Pharisees in the back are going to be cast into outer darkness. I'm so glad to be one of the few. I just love Jesus' stories...

When he's done telling stories, after a little more back and forth with the religious leaders, Jesus will leave the temple and he'll predict its destruction. But it's almost like with these stories he's doing it already, tearing down the temple with its system of laws, tearing down the system that taught us we could please God by being good, that by following a list of rules, by being moral and religious, we could get ourselves in the good graces, on the guestlist, of a just God. That's what the whole first half of the Bible is about, God trying to get the people to follow the laws centered around—you guessed it—loving God and loving neighbor. But it's like herding cats.

In the parable, Jesus calls out two persistent evils that plague the people governed by the Law. The first, idolatry. Sometimes that looked like casting a golden calf, but mostly it looked like serving oneself instead of God. When one's money or work is more important than going to God's feast. Turns out, we would rather worship little gods we can see, like everybody else does, than an invisible, mighty God. And the second persistent evil: hypocrisy. Outwardly doing the right thing but only to benefit oneself, not out of love for God. Benefiting from the rule and protection of the king but not going to his feast to celebrate with him.

Reading through the Prophets, you can almost see God throwing up God's hands, saying, "I gave the Law everything I had. It seemed like a good idea. I thought it would work to keep my people close to me; I thought it would teach them righteousness and keep them pure. But I see that wasn't enough."

So the new plan involves going out into the streets and gathering in everybody, law keepers and law breakers, to not insist that they be righteous citizens first but anybody, anybody within reach, drawn in, not because they deserve it but because God loves them and wants to be with them.

This is where the parable would have ended, if it was just like the other two, but here's where the twist comes in. So far Jesus' stories have critiqued the way of the Law, the religious establishment, but now he gives a whispered warning about this new plan God is establishing.

The surprised loiterers-turned-guests are pulled off the streets, and they're handed wedding gear, fancy dress, at the door. It was not uncommon in the ancient world for kings to do that, since fabric was expensive and many people only owned the clothes on their back, certainly no black tie in the back of their closet. So kings hoarded

armloads of appropriate clothing for parties to dole out to anybody, enabling the less well off guests to be as well dressed as the rich ones.

Jesus doesn't say what the party dress means in his parable, so we guess—is it the righteous acts that followers of Jesus accomplish, empowered by God's Spirit to act out of love instead of selfishness? Is it a character defined by joy and gratitude that befits a recipient of such grace? Or is the party dress God's grace, covering our unsightliness—pure, clean clothes, “washed in the blood of the Lamb” (in the odd words of Revelation)?

In Ezekiel, the prophet tells a story of God finding a baby, a beautiful, naked baby abandoned in the field. God cares for the child, feeds her fine food and clothes her, raises her to be a beautiful young woman, clothed in finery. Which she then spurns, and rejects God, trusting in her beauty instead, not the one who clothed her. It's a pretty racy story.

Why would an orphan cast aside clothes given to her?

Why would a ragged street person reject party robes?

Is it because I think I'm not worthy to receive the gift, even though the door has been thrown open wide and I have already been hustled in?

Is it because I think my clothes are better than the ones offered me? The filthy rags of my self-righteousness better than the splendor of God's grace?

Is it because I'm too proud to wear borrowed clothes, and I'd rather try to make it on my own than rely on the Spirit's work in me?

Jesus is making it clear that the hypocrisy and idolatry of self that was present in the temple and the old way still haunts us today. The temple has been torn down, but not along with it the temptation to rely on ourselves, or to honor ourselves more than God.

This is why Jesus ends with a warning. Any time I get too comfortable in my status as one of the “called ones” or “the chosen ones,” any time I claim a seat at the banquet because of my own merit, whenever I rely on my own goodness, whenever I turn my nose up at the other guests rubbing shoulders with me at the table, I am stripping myself of the garment of God's grace, making a peep show of my shabby self-righteousness, and I don't belong any more at the feast of grace. Jesus' hyperbole shows us just how important this is, how close to the heart of God it is—utter, wanton, unmerited, unedited grace.

You and I, we have been brought in from the outer darkness, into the firelit warmth of the feast, alongside strangers, friends, enemies, and we have the choice to wrap the garments given us tighter around our shoulders, to choose joy and gratitude and

wonder instead of judgement, to shrug deeper into God's grace, let it cover us. The grace of God is a wild, ruffled thing, by turns warm and cozy flannel, or workclothes, grimy and sturdy, or protective leather, or black tie and lace party clothes. Let that grace cover you, let it carry you; you have nothing to fear.