

Pentecost 20-October 15, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 22:1-14

“The Wedding Hall was Filled.”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

It's almost impossible to give things away without attaching some cost. Marketers teach us that lesson by instructing us to put at least some price on what you are trying to get rid of to get the attention of any prospective buyers with the hopes they might be enticed into thinking they are getting a good deal rather than getting something that has no value. It's one thing to use this tactic to sell something that you no longer want, and it is just taking up space in your home, but you would think when you are giving away a treasure of great value at no cost, people would be eagerly lining up to not miss out on this once in a lifetime deal.

The parable of the wedding feast seems to be such an example of how hard it is to even give something of great value away. This was not just any ordinary wedding. This parable is about the highest-ranking person of a country, the king, that was giving this wedding bash and it was by invitation only. Save the dates must not have been a thing yet. The king could have started this way so that those who would later receive the formal invitation could plan ahead and keep their calendars clear. The king assumed anyone who had this chance to come to this magnificent banquet would drop whatever they were doing and pack up and go. The king had a miserable response from those that were first invited. Wedding planners help couples anticipate what percentage of those receiving invitations will come to the wedding ceremony and then how many will come later to the reception. It is not uncommon for 20-30% of those invited to never show up. But in the parable of the wedding feast that this king gave for his son, no one showed up. In fact, they said they didn't say they couldn't come, they said they **would not come**.

Usually if something doesn't sell very well, one of the first places to find fault is in the amount, the places, or the investment you made in advertising. It sounds like in the parable of the wedding feast, there was another attempt to convince those who had been invited to reconsider the invitation by doing a better job selling the event. A sales trick that is often used is to add an element of urgency to the sale. If you are looking at a car you want, the salesperson might remind you that they haven't had a car like that one on the lot for as long as they can remember. Or they might try to speed up your decision by telling you that others have called and are on their way to also look at the car and they won't be able to hold the car so you can take your time while you make up your mind. The king tells the messengers who are making their second attempt at delivering the invitation to impress on the ones who had received the invitations that everything is prepared and ready. The messengers also tell those invited that the feast will not be a chincy meal that you could probably find in your own refrigerator or cupboard at home. This meal is from the fattened calf and oxen that have received royal treatment as they were grown and as they were slaughtered and aged specifically for the wedding of the king's son. It was going to be more like savoring a steak from a Ruth Chris restaurant rather than chewing on one from Whiskey Creek.

The advertising strategy didn't work any better than just dropping off the invitations. Still, not one person came. This time, instead of those being invited being defiant by saying they wouldn't come, it sounded like they were indifferent to the idea of attending the banquet. Scripture says they made light of it. However, this time they gave some excuses why they would turn down the invitation. One had to go to his farm to do some work and another had some business to attend to. I remember learning the song about the excuses that were made for not attending the wedding banquet in Sunday School. "I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now. I have married a wife. I have bought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray hold me excused I cannot come." We of course would have no trouble making even a longer list of other reasons that

are often given that take priority over an invitation from our Heavenly King to neglect hearing his word. This parable takes a terrible turn at this point when instead of only making light of the invitation, there was a group who didn't want another invitation delivered so, as they say, literally, killed the messengers. After hearing what was done to the king's messengers, the king exercised his power in return and in his anger destroyed the murderers and their towns.

After these drastic measures are taken by the king, you might think the king would give up. But again, everything was ready for the banquet. The only thing missing was the guests. So, the king found more messengers and expanded the wedding list to include anyone who would come so that the hall would be filled with guests. Invitations were handed out recklessly without knowing what kind of people they were. Good and bad people on the streets took advantage of getting this invitation and went to the banquet and the hall was filled. The attendees made the cut simply by coming to the banquet. Other than the idea that bad people were also included at this feast, this would be a perfect place to end the parable. We could end this parable by saying those who rejected the invitation were cast out and the ones who accepted the invitation got the reward of the feast. But if I said that, this parable would be about the guests rather than the one who gave the feast. But this parable doesn't end here. It gets more troubling.

Instead, the king now enters the reception hall that is full of guests and notices one man who was not wearing a wedding robe. This man did not read the fine print on the invitation about the dress code that everyone who had attended had to follow. The king calls this person, friend. This is the best English from the Greek translation that the translators seem to use. But the Greek word for friend that the king used was **ἑταῖρος** which is only used two other times in the New Testament. Once in the story we heard a few weeks ago when the owner of the vineyard paid the worker the same wage who had worked all day as the one who only worked an hour. He called the man who grumbled about the unjust wages, **ἑταῖρος**. Jesus also called Judas this kind of friend after he betrayed him with a kiss. You do not want to hear Jesus call you this kind of friend.

What happens to this friend is another violent event in this parable. Isn't the king possibly overreacting to this person who at least came to the banquet after being invited? Isn't this wedding crasher a step above those who didn't show up at all or had lame excuses for other things to do? The problem with this wedding crasher is that he has nothing to say for himself. He was speechless. He was thrown out because he didn't think he needed to wear the wedding robe. It was likely the custom of that day for the king to provide this wedding robe for the guests, but regardless of if this robe was provided or the requirement was simply ignored, the reality of the matter was that this guest did not have what was required and he had nothing to say for himself.

Well, where is the good news in this troubling parable? As the king teaches, what was required of the guests had nothing to do with their acceptance or rejection of the invitation or if the guest was a good or bad person or if they were worthy or unworthy of receiving the invitation. The good news is that the only thing you and I need to attend the wedding banquet is faith and that too is given to us. We cannot sneak past the king into the banquet by our good works. The good news is that your wedding robe is the garment of righteousness that is your free gift to you that has been accomplished by the work of the king's son. The good news for you and I is that the wedding is ready. There is nothing more that you can do or could ever do. The good news is that this is not a once in a lifetime offer. The king will continue to pursue guests to arrive at his wedding feast by sending his messengers with this good news that is almost too good to be true. And if the king asks you how you got into the wedding banquet, you will not be speechless. You will have the only answer you will need. You will tell the king, "I am here because you have promised me a place at the banquet." Your only additional response will be to enjoy the feast that was prepared for you. Amen