

INVITED TO A PARTY
9 October Anno Domini 2011 (17th Sunday after Pentecost)
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Isaiah 25:6-9 and Matthew 22:1-14

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. 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. 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."

Matthew 22:1-14

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!

Many are invited to the party; few bother to show up. Many are died for; few actually trust that fact. Many have a place at the heavenly banquet; few take their seat at the table. We already have a sense of that: Many are on the church's registry; few bother to show up on any given Sunday. The mystery of faith and unbelief, inclusion and exclusion. Welcome to the parable of the wedding feast.

"Jesus spoke to them again in parables." "They" are once again those religious leaders, those plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed. Jesus is on the way to His death and yet He delivers a party parable. It's a great image of heaven, lifted right out of Isaiah's messianic text where the Lord is the chef and sommelier. A feast of grade A meats and vintage wines. It doesn't get any better than that. Forget the fasting and mournful meals of religious dieting. The death shroud is lifted, swallowed up in life and resurrection joy. Who cares about cholesterol when your bodies are raised to eternal life? And who wouldn't join in a toast of vintage wine that gladdens the hearts of men when death is swallowed up in life and defeated forever?

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." This is back before the time when brides and their mothers took over the wedding business. Weddings were man's work back then. You'll notice that a BBQ was the main event, oxen and fattened cattle and plenty of wine. The servants go out into the city with the word to the invited: The feast is ready. Come to my son's wedding banquet."

But, strangely, mysteriously, the invited refuse a free meal at the king's table! A wedding party, and you don't even have to bring a present, you don't have to worry about what to wear, it's all provided. Just be present! Amazingly simple!

Again, the King sends out more of his servants, preaching the menu. Maybe they'll come when they hear about the food and drink. Advertise and make them hungry. - Roasted meats, fine wines it's all prepared just waiting for you. But again, the invitation is ignored. They go on with their lives as though there was no wedding, no feast, no son, and no king. Some went to work in the field; some went to tend their business. Some played golf, some slept in, some read the newspaper over coffee, changed their light bulbs, watched the playoffs on TV. We know all the excuses. We hear them all the time. We have even use them ourselves, when the king's feast doesn't quite fit our schedules.

Then things get ugly. The invited guests seize the king's servants and beat them up; some are killed. You can't be neutral when it comes to the king's feast. Sooner or later you will turn against the king and his servants. There is no polite and neutral "no" to Jesus' salvation. Refuse Him and you must silence Him and His servants - by the courts, and even by force. A wedding turns into war. Grace becomes wrath. The king who started out in a party mood turns in anger against the murderers and their city. There's judgment to pay. But don't blame the king; he just wanted a party.

Listen. The only way to get on the God's bad side is to refuse His goodness, His gifts. These were invited folks, the A-list. They had a place at the wedding feast. There was roasted lamb and sides of beef and vintage Cabernet ready all waiting for them. But they said a foolish, unbelieving, hard-hearted "no" to the king's goodness. More than that, they beat and killed His servants. Big mistake! Refuse the king's mercy, mistreat his servants, reject His gifts, and you risk His wrath. You wouldn't want to do that, would you? Faith never refuses the gifts but embraces them.

The A-list has proven itself unworthy by its refusal. Jesus would soon lament over religious Jerusalem, *"How I longed to gather you under my wing, O Jerusalem, as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not"* (Matthew 23:37). If we are left out in utter darkness, we have only ourselves to blame. Refusal of our acceptance is what excludes. Or to put it bluntly, hell is direct refusal of your own salvation. The only sin that isn't forgiven is the refusal to be forgiven.

Out into the streets and alleyways the servants go again, this time inviting anyone and everyone they could find: Tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners of every type; the least, the lost, the losers, the dead of this world. The type of people who had never been invited to anything in their lives! The type of people who would never consider themselves to be worthy to sit at a king's table. The good, the bad and the ugly. Isn't that remarkable? The good and the bad both are welcome. There's hope for all of us! And please observe: The goodness of the good doesn't get them included, any more than the badness of the bad get them excluded. It's all a gift, by grace, for the Son's sake.

Why don't we get that? Why doesn't the church seem to understand that all the King wants, is for his hall to be filled with hungry and thirsty guests? Why are we so preoccupied with making the bad good and keeping the good from going bad? It's because we can't resist biting into the notion that good and evil is the way to handle things. It's our inbred nature from Adam. We're religion junkies. We'd rather snack on spiritual junk food than dine at the king's table. We'd rather belly up to the bar of bogus spirituality than be fed the rich food and strong drink of salvation in Jesus. Be good and you're in; be bad and you're out. That's our moral math, and we think God is on the same page with us.

But not so with the king of the party parable. He welcomes the good and the bad. Don't have a ride? He'll send a limo to pick you up. Don't have the right clothes to wear? He's handing out Armani suits and Dior evening gowns to everyone. He wants a well-dressed crowd on his dance floor. It's all his grace, gift. Undeserved, unearned, unmerited.

The king looks out over his banquet hall and smiles. The banquet hall is full. The party is on. The people are eating and drinking and dancing. But off in the corner there's a party pooper. A man sipping iced tea, wearing a t-shirt and shorts and a scowl on his face. He goes over to the man. "Hey buddy, how'd you get in here without my wedding suit?" But the man had nothing to say. Speechless! The king's good mood turns foul, and he orders the royal bouncers to bind him up and toss him outside into the darkness. The man was in before he was thrown out. And he was out for his refusal to be in on the king's terms. It's the king's party, not ours.

What should the man have done? What would you have done? What would you have said if you were caught looking like a wedding crasher? What would you have said to the king? How about, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." That always works with this king. He's the king who clothes you. ***"For all of you who were baptized into Christ, have been clothed with Christ"*** (Galatians 3:27). You are covered with His righteousness, His holiness, His perfection. Baptism is your wedding suit, your tuxedo or posh frock or glorious gown, formal wear fit for eternal life and a wedding feast that never ends. But refuse the king's clothing, and you will find yourself grinding and gnashing your teeth and wailing in utter darkness. Such a pity. Such a waste. Refusing the gift from God is utter foolishness. It's unbelief and in this case it's your fault, not God's.

"God would have all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). ***"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and doesn't count men's sins against them"*** (2 Corinthians 5:19). ***"God has consigned all to disobedience in order that He might have mercy upon all"*** (Romans 11:32). God desires the death of no man.

Notice at the end of this parable, there is no one who didn't have a place at the wedding party - not the first invited A-list, not the loser list and not even the man without the wedding suit. All were called to the feast. All had a place. Jesus died for all; He embraced all in His death. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His blood was shed to save the inclusive many- the good, the bad, the ugly, the religious and the unreligious, every child of Adam. Those who are in - are in by grace, undeserved kindness a free gift from God. Those who are out - are out by their own stubborn refusal to be in.

You have been called and invited to feast on God's mountain. Your Baptism is a personal invitation signed by the Father, written in the blood of Jesus, sealed by the Holy Spirit, addressed to you by name. You have a place at the King's table. The Body of the Lamb has been broken in death to save you. His Blood has been poured out to save you, His life for your life. Your life is atoned for; your sins are washed away. This divine service is a preview, a shadow of The Supper of the Lamb in His kingdom which shall have no end. ***"Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb"*** (Revelation 19:9).

You are worthy to be at His table, to receive all that Jesus died to win for you, not because of what you have done for Him, but because of what He has done for you. He has gone the way of weeping and gnashing of teeth, the way of death and of God's wrath- being forsaken suffering darkness and hell, by the way of the cross. He has taken your sin upon Himself, He has borne your shame in nakedness on the cross in order to clothe you with His wedding suit. "Behold, a host arrayed in white," you among them, wearing their white baptismal robes of righteousness.

You may not realize it, but you are already at the party, now in Christ. He has incorporated you into His death, embraced you with the Word of forgiveness, fed you with His body (in with and under the bread) and His blood (in with and under the wine). It's hidden and yet is truly here for you. Soon you will see and feel and know fully what you now must trust and believe, on that Day Jesus raises you up from the depths of your grave to the heights of His mountain, and sets you at His banquet table, and you raise the cup of salvation to toast His goodness:

"Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation" (Isaiah 25:9). In Jesus name, Amen and Amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, **AMEN!**