

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 23 (2026)

Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

“‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, *but they would not come.*’” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Parables and many miracle stories in the Bible are designed to shock us out of complacency. They are designed to have us rethink old patterns of behavior and expectations. They reveal a deeper spiritual understanding of how the kingdom of God operates, especially when compared with the world's standards. Matthew's Jesus uses yet another hyperbolic, exaggerated parable with the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees, elders, and scribes, to shock them out of their comfortable sense of security about their place in the religious hierarchy of 'who's in and who's out.' Jesus' teaching leaves them stunned, speechless, angry, and humiliated; thus, they need to be done with this rabble-rousing itinerant preacher from the backwater town of Nazareth.

We find this same encounter with the Pharisees and Jesus' use of the banquet theme in Luke's Gospel. The invited guests have excuses for not coming: one bought new land, another new ox, and the third couldn't make it because he had just gotten married. Obviously unhappy, the master of the house sends the servants out a second time, this time to invite the poor, crippled, blind, and lame throughout the city. The servants report that there is still room available, so the master sends them out again, this time going everywhere with the invitation so his banquet hall may be filled. But for those who were invited and chose not to attend, the banquet hall is now off limits.

In contrast, Matthew's Jesus says that the invited guests *just didn't show up*. He sent out his slaves a second time, imploring the invited guests that the festivities

were ready; come and enjoy the wedding banquet. While not offering any excuses, many of the invitees stayed at work; some just dismissed the offer, while others violently treated the messengers. Not surprisingly, this enraged the king, and in response to their refusal, he sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. The king declared those who refused his generous invitation as ‘unworthy.’ Still with room in the banquet hall, the king sent another invitation to anyone and everyone, good and bad. As a result, the hall was filled.

Honestly, I like Luke’s version better. In part because there isn’t violence, murder, or burning of the city. Remember, parables were designed to be hyperbolic and exaggerated. Matthew obviously took this to heart. Like last week’s parable of the Tenants, today’s parable is also allegorical. As such, the king is God. And while there are numerous stories in the Old Testament about the ‘wrath of God,’ the God we have come to know in the person of Jesus Christ isn’t a God who would wreak havoc and destroy people and burn cities because folks didn’t accept his invitation or refused his message. Jesus may have called the Pharisees ‘hypocrites’ on more than a few occasions, but he was always trying to get them to open their hearts to his message of inclusion and transformation; to get them to ‘see with the eyes of their hearts’ beyond the law and rituals of religiosity to understand and embrace the wider concepts of the ways of God through love, compassion, patience, service, and generosity.

But the other reason I prefer Luke’s account is that he doesn’t include throwing out the inappropriately dressed guest into the ‘outer darkness’ where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew uses this phrase half a dozen times to describe the judgment awaiting those who refuse the Lord.

Yes, this parable certainly focuses on judgment, but judgment is uncomfortable, and for some, it engenders fear and trembling. I am not saying that judgment isn’t real and that we shouldn’t take it seriously. I am not soft-soaping this scriptural reality. Today, however, I also don’t think Jesus wants people to come to a party out of ‘fear’ but out of joy, exuberance, excitement, and appreciation for the unearned blessings that come from being with others and enjoying the celebration. While the lectionary gives us Matthew’s version of the parable today, that doesn’t

mean that judgment needs to be the focus or that fear should be our response. I think we should focus on the invitation and what we do with it.

Many of this summer's scripture readings have dealt with an invitation to live 'kingdom' lives. We have been invited to 'come and see,' to 'find purpose and value by working in the 'vineyard' of God's kingdom, and to today's invitation to a wedding banquet. The gist is that 'all' are welcome to this way of living; all we have to do is accept the offer to enter into the labor of the vineyard and then enjoy the banquet.

I hope you noticed a couple of things from today's reading. First, did you notice that no one was excluded from the banquet? The first group of invitees to this lavish wedding feast were the recipients of this amazing invitation. They didn't have to buy a ticket or enter a raffle. They were simply asked to accept the invitation and enjoy the blessings and happiness of the festivities. Unfortunately, they chose otherwise, more interested in the day-to-day routine of their comfortable lives. The second group of invitees, the any-and-all from the main streets, both good and bad, were also invited without needing a reservation. Again, they were graciously invited to enjoy the celebration. And they did!! They 'showed up' and, as a result, the hall was filled with guests. The only difference between the two groups was that one said 'yes' and came to the hall, while the other opted for other opportunities. This is how life is, isn't it? The invitation to an amazing life, metaphorically depicted as a great banquet, is offered to us every day. We can choose whether to attend, but the consequences for our spiritual health and well-being are eternal.

This is the second key issue that stands out to me: 'showing up' puts us in a position to be transformed by working in the vineyard and enjoying the fruits of attending the banquet. When our lives are filled with the things of God, when our prayer lives are active, when our times of study and meditation are consistent, through our times of worship, by our willingness to serve others, in the generosity of our time and resources for the work of the kingdom, we are transformed, and our lives are enriched. When we choose the world's distractions, our lives are ultimately diminished, and as the English Prayer Book of 1662 says in the Confession, 'there is no health in us.'

Dear friends, God's gracious invitation to a new, transformed life is always open and available. Life in the kingdom is truly living. Life in the world is not. You don't need a ticket, and none of us can do anything to earn our way into the banquet hall. Each of us just has to say 'yes' to the grandest party of all parties and then 'show up,' recipients made worthy solely by the grace of a generous God. "Come on in," God says, "Glad you're here."