Nativity Lutheran Church Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida Text: Matthew 22:1-14

October 15, 2017 Theme: THE JUDGMENT OF GRACE

**1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.
  11“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14For many are called, but few are chosen.”**

In Nomine Jesu

+ + +

Maybe this sounds presumptuous, but I think that I know you pretty well by now – how you think, what makes you tick. In part, that’s because I know myself – how I think, what makes me tick. And I figure we’re, all of us, typical, mainline, gracious, Christians.

So I think that when today’s Gospel was being read, at first we thought that we liked Jesus’ story – an invitation is given to a great banquet, but those first invited – those cronies of the rich man giving the party – reject the invitation. So the rich man says to his servants, “Hey, I’ve already paid the caterers, so go out this time and bring in the maimed, the blind, and the lame and let them come to the party. Those first invited aren’t worthy of my generosity.”

And we tend to like that because we believe that God is gracious, loving, inviting, and forgiving. “Isn’t it nice to know,” we think, “that our God goes to the marginalized, the poor, and dispossessed?” Nice thought. Feels good.

But that’s not the whole story. This would have been just a nice story if Jesus had left it at that – with God’s graciousness being shown to the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. But what really gets us about this story isn’t the host’s graciousness; it’s his harsh, totally over-the-top judgment. “Oh, and the first invitees who were unable to come? Really? Well, I want you to go back to them and send them to hell (that’s where “outer darkness” is)! Torture them! Kill them! That’ll teach them to refuse one of my invitations!”

And if that’s not bad enough, one of the poor, maimed, and blind that makes it into the party gets into the worst sort of trouble because of the way he’s dressed. “You there,” the host says, “where’s your tux?” “Well, master, I was homeless living on the street just an hour ago before I got your invitation, what would I do with formal wear?” The host responds, “Really? … well, go to hell! Torture him! Kill him!”

I know us pretty well. It really bothers us that Jesus would tell a story like this to nice, typical, mainline, gracious Christian people like us!

What we want is for the master to say, in the face of our rejection of the invitation that comes our way, “That’s OK. I’ll just give you a rain check. I know that you’re really busy. We’ll miss you, but don’t give it a thought.”

But this master? “Kill ’em! Go to hell!” Why should the master lose it and go ballistic when folk don’t show up for a party? That’s the question.

Back when I was in high school and college there were no cell phones. And if you wanted to call out from college and into the real world, you were forced to use the phone down at the end of the hall. Well, my friend thought that was great because his room was at the end of the hall. He could listen in on everyone’s conversations!

So one evening he heard a student who was obviously in troubled conversation with his mother. And it was clear that his mother was giving him a really bad time about his grades. And he was giving her the old, “Yes, Mom, but that professor didn’t really like me,” and, “I don’t know what happened in that class” sort of stuff.

When this obviously painful conversation ended the student staggered into my friend’s room and dropped down on the sofa, exhausted. My friend’s heart went out to him. “Sometimes it’s hard to get your parents to understand, isn’t it?” he said. He wanted to give some comfort.

But my friend was startled when he heard, “I can understand her anger.” He explained, “My mother’s invested a lot in me. Right now she’s working two jobs to pay for my college tuition. She called me from the office that she cleans at night. So I guess she’s got a right to be upset with me.” That made what might have seemed trivial, a really important conversation, right?

Our text’s message is that God’s invitations are always a serious matter. Here’s Jesus going to pay for the most expensive party ever given. He’s on his way to his cross. And what’s our response? Is it excuses, refusal, rejection? If so, can any of us think that Jesus’ anger wouldn’t be justified?

Now I don’t believe that we always pay for our specific sins; but sometimes we do. Our actions, or lack of action, have consequences … almost always. We sometimes pay dearly when we take a step in the wrong direction. At other times we pay even more dearly when we fail to take a step in the right direction.

The point is that our choices matter. Our life isn’t only the doors we open and walk through, but also the doors that we close, the invitations we’ve rejected.

Maybe it’s happened to you like this as well. That same friend told me the story of when he had to spend a couple of days in Atlanta preparing for graduate school taking a bunch of tests and going through the interview process. He arrived in Atlanta and checked into a hotel. No sooner had he settled into his room than there was a knock at his door. He opened the door to see this guy standing there saying, “Howdy, my name is Roy. What’s yours?” My friend was a bit startled by the request, but he offered his name and Roy continued, “Well, we’re going to have a great party tonight, right down the hall. Come and join us.”

Aside from the fact that Roy didn’t even know him, my friend told him that he had a big day the next day and needed to rest up for all of his important interviews.

“You’re making a big mistake. We’ve got lots of folks coming over, lots of great music. You really ought to come to the party.” This guy just didn’t want to take “no” for an answer.

Well, my friend was relieved when he finally got rid of the interruption. He had dinner and settled in his room for the night. And just before he was getting ready for bed, sure enough, he could hear music - loud music - coming from down the hall where they were obviously cranking up the party. And there was another loud knock at his door. He opened it. And there stood Roy.

Once again my friend got rid of him, got his earplugs firmly in place, and went to sleep. But he didn’t sleep all that well. The sounds of the party kept forcing their way into the room. And the next morning, on the way to the interviews, he saw the trash in the hall that was evidence of the rowdy party the night before. As he passed the room at the end of the hall, the door swung open, and there was Roy. “You really missed a great party last night. You should’ve come. We missed you.”

Well, my friend went through the interviews, got accepted into the graduate program, three years later got the degree, and he’s had a fairly productive and interesting life since those two days in Atlanta. But he still says he wishes he’d accepted the invitation and gone to the party.

There’s a kicker in the story. Years later my friend was part of a group that was having a big demonstration against what they considered a bad law in Alabama about immigration rights. Hundreds of folks, representing dozens of congregations and groups, had come out on a Saturday to protest that law. And, guess what? My friend was pleased, but surprised, to see Roy, a retired clergy by then marching at the head of the line. “Good to see you here, Roy,” he said to him.

“I had an opportunity to speak up and speak out in the ’60s, during the days when the civil rights movement was in full swing and I blew it,” Roy said. “I failed to stand up, speak out, and be counted. My whole life I’ve regretted my failure. That’s why I’m here,” Roy told my friend. “I hope it’s not too late.”

Sometimes we fail to step up and respond to the invitation when it is given. But by God’s grace, sometimes we get a second chance to say “yes” when the invitation comes our way again … maybe in a new and different way.

Back in high school I remember my agony in trying to work up the courage to ask a girl – well, not just any girl, the girl of my dreams – to go out with me on a date. I’d carefully rehearsed the conversation, made sure to get my lines right. Then, at the appropriate moment I summoned up all of my strength, picked up the phone, dialed the number (back in those days we always had to “dial the number”), and asked her out. Happily she accepted my invitation. But many times that’s not what happened.

Maybe you’ve had a similar experience. I noted that the other girls who declined my offer always had an excuse – she was already invited to the dance, her grandmother was really sick, whatever … but I also noted that the excuses made no difference. Even perfectly good excuses hurt just as much as bad excuses.   When my invitation was rejected the reason didn’t really matter as much as simply being rejected.

But back to today’s text. There was a time I wondered how that big time mover and shaker in our text could expect the people to be ready for a wedding if they had just been pulled in off the street. But then I noticed that somehow all the other last minute guests had managed to get appropriately attired. They had all gotten wedding garments. There’s only one man who hadn’t bothered with changing. “If he wants me there, he can take me like I am,” I guess was his attitude. Not to have gotten all decked out must have been an intentional decision. All the others off the street managed to come in with all the bells and whistles. That’s because the host had provided all … even the ingrate who didn’t bother to change … the clothes to wear. Sounds like what Jesus has done for us in life and death and resurrection, eh?

Now I’d wager that if you had been at that party in today’s text you would have been very much aware that what you did there and how you acted was serious business. This was no casual “come as you are, take it or leave it” affair. In fact this party proved to be a matter of life and death. Oh, yes, if we were at that party, we would have been on pins and needles. And we would have been wise to worry about whether or not we used the correct fork or spoon, because you just never knew what the host might do next.

Jesus is talking about the coming kingdom of God and how it feels when the people hearing his preaching are debating whether the matter is a big deal or not. It’s as if for some of them the kingdom of God is some small matter like who wins the football game or tennis match this weekend that you’re focused on. So Jesus tells us this story to remind us that the kingdom of God is the central question of our lives. Now and always.

I love the prayer we pray once in a while -- that ancient one that asks for forgiveness for “the things we have done and the things we have left undone.” In today’s parable there are sad consequences, not so much because of some wrong that someone has done, but rather because of something good that was left undone. An invitation received but not accepted.

So now we pray: God of all people, you have lovingly invited all of us to become part of your life in our world. You even suffered to prepare a place for all of us at your table. You’ve gone to extraordinary lengths to be sure that everyone, good and bad, is on your guest list. So we pray that by your grace you would enable us, when you call us, to hear your voice, to respond to that call, and to live courageously as your disciples. And now, having received the gracious invitation to your banquet, help us go forth and invite others to come to your great feast. In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN!

+ + +

Soli Deo Gloria