

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sixteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 24, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 349:1-5, 75:3, 371, 509, 37:3

Lessons: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Romans 9:1-18, Matthew 22:1-14.

Sermon Text: Luke 14:15-24

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

“When one of those at the table with [Jesus] heard [the parable you heard about in last Sunday’s sermon], he said to Jesus, ‘Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.’” We don’t know exactly why this man said what he did. But Jesus then tells another parable. The man who said this likely believed that he would be one of those enjoying the great feast of heaven. He probably did not consider that he would not be *“at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* He was probably one of the Pharisees at this dinner and was not even imagining that he was really rejecting the true Messiah as his Savior. Jesus had just told a parable that spoke of a wedding feast, and warned people not to usurp the greatest places of honor. Jesus’ parable today is about an even greater honor – the honor of sitting at the banquet of eternal life in heaven. His message shocks or should shock those who think that their place in it is assured. His parable warns against rejecting God’s invitation. He really asks

WHO SHALL ENJOY THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

1. **Those who had been invited for centuries – the physical descendants of Abraham – have rejected the kingdom.**
2. **What Jesus offers at that banquet.**
3. **Jesus will invite others to come if or when you reject the kingdom.**

It is really true that *“Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”* But who is really going to enjoy that privilege? Jesus is really saying ‘you Jews, who think you have the monopoly on the kingdom of God will generally reject it, and Gentiles will be the greatest sharers in it.’ Jesus tells about this by means of a parable. If he had spoken it plainly, the Pharisees would have been ready to kill him then and there.

As we look at this parable, certain ideas stand out. Since Jesus told this in response to a comment about the Kingdom of God, it is easy to think of God himself being the one in the parable who prepared the great feast, the great banquet. Then, *“at the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’”* When we find references such as our Old Testament lesson speaking of Jesus, God’s Son, as *“my servant”* (Isaiah 52:13) we find it easy to think of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, as the servant in this parable. When we hear Jesus saying *“Come, for everything is now ready”* we also think of Jesus’ words at the end of his life *“It is finished”* (John 19:30).

But everyone who was first invited made excuses not to come. *“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’”* For the first one, his excuse is possessions which he has accumulated. He asks to be excused. For the second, since one usually checks out property he intends to buy, it is possessions which he wants. He, too, asks to be excused. The third simply states that he can’t come, because he has other plans. These are all things to do which are not sinful in themselves.

But they have become sinful in their misuse of them. Paul has this to say about the last days, in which we really are living: ***“What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”*** (1 Corinthians 7:29-31 NIV) Notice how he warns against the misuse of ***“the things of the world.”***

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’” God brings in the spiritually sick, needy and poor, while those who are rich in their own merits exclude themselves and are then excluded by God from his kingdom.

As Jesus draws near to the end of his life, Matthew reports: ***“Jesus said to [the chief priests and the elders], ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’”*** (Matthew 21:31 NIV) These are examples of penitent sinners who recognize their sinfulness as opposed to those who think of themselves as “good people” like the Pharisees did. So ***“the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame”*** are brought in.

In the parable the servant then tells the master: ***“what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”*** Because those in the physical kingdom of Israel, who had been invited since the days of Abraham didn’t come and fill the banquet, those outside of Israel have been invited and brought in.

Do you see the boundless love, grace and mercy of God? That is delivered to us whenever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. But what do people do with that invitation whenever it is offered? What do we do with it every time it is offered?

Look at what God has provided for our souls: the rich banquet food of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

First, let’s make application to the Jews. After God chose Abraham out of all the tribes of the world, the people whom God invited to receive eternal life are first of all the Jews. From the time of Abraham throughout the entire Old Testament period, up to the very time Jesus walked the earth, the Israelites were God’s chosen people from whom the Savior would be born.

This was a ***“great banquet”***. This was not just a situation where a casual invitation was issued to ‘stop by and visit sometime’ but it was a banquet. And even today people make special preparations to go to a “banquet”. They don’t just show up wearing their dirty work-clothes or filthy gardening-clothes.

In a similar parable which you heard in our Gospel lesson, you see that special “dress-up” clothing was required. And when people came in, they had to be clothed in the garments Jesus gives. Those garments are his blood and righteousness.

The people who were invited seem to have been quite important in worldly matters. One of them, a well-to-do landowner, had to check out some property he had bought. Another had bought five yoke of oxen. He, too, was rather well-off to purchase at least ten oxen. Another had just gotten married, certainly an important earthly event. But in their minds all these people’s activities took precedence over the banquet in God’s kingdom.

The Jews bring excuses and evasion. Their attitude should have been different, for they were the people upon whom God for centuries had lavished his love and grace. But they rejected the invitation. They despised the great banquet God had made. On Palm Sunday, near the very end of his life, Jesus is much more direct in condemning Jews who rejected him and would not accept his invitation to eternal life: ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”*** (Luke 13:34 NIV and Matthew 23:37 NIV)

So God turns to the lowly in Israel, in the streets and lanes. They had previously received the invitation, but the strict legalism of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law may have made them feel unworthy. All the people of Israel had been invited. But what the religious leaders didn’t recognize was their own sinfulness and unworthiness.

The religious leaders of Israel thought themselves assured of places in heaven. But when they reject the invitation, God turns to ***“the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”*** Jesus is really giving them this warning: ***“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”*** (1 Corinthians 10:12 NIV)

Although this parable does not speak of what was served at the banquet, we should take a moment again to speak of what God offers in his kingdom, the kingdom of his grace, ending in the literal kingdom of heaven. He offers the forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and salvation. He offers peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. These gifts are yours simply by believing in Jesus Christ as your Savior from all your sins. Listen to what Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit: ***“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*** (Gal. 5:22-25 NIV) The catechism summarizes the gifts of the Holy Spirit in this list: Knowledge that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. The assurance of faith that I am justified before God through Christ. Peace with God. The hope of heaven. The witness that I am a child of God. Comfort in all tribulation. Confidence to pray, and all blessedness which Jesus Christ, my Lord obtained for me. This list contains everything that is required to satisfy the sinner’s greatest needs and to fill the void that is experienced when one is a stranger to God.

Now let’s make application to ourselves. We Gentiles were not part of the first chosen people of God. We were outsiders, outside the city, on the highways and in the hedges.

Finally, the servant brings in those from ***“the roads and country lanes.”*** These are aliens to the people of Israel and strangers from the first covenants of promise.

Everyone who believes – and that includes you, doesn’t it? – are in God’s kingdom of grace even now. But don’t reject it! Don’t turn your back on it! Don’t all the excuses seem like reasonable excuses? Don’t we come up with reasonable excuses – at least they may seem reasonable to us. But will they seem reasonable to God?

It is glorious to become partakers in the blessings of the kingdom, which is prepared and offered as a free gift. Remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. ***“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”*** (1 Cor.1:26-30 NIV)

Let everyone take heed lest he lose these blessings. Beware! Haven’t we had the Gospel available to us all our lives? But look at history and how the pure Gospel was rejected in land after land. God’s special, chosen people rebelled against God and by and large rejected him, even up to the days of Jesus, and especially since the time that Jesus, the very Son of God, walked the earth. And the message was given to Gentiles. When we look at the history of Christianity, we see how lands which once had the Gospel in its truth and purity no longer have it. For example, in the following lands it is very hard, almost impossible to find the Word of God taught and lived in its truth and purity. The Gospel once spread throughout Palestine and Israel, then Asia Minor (now Turkey), then Greece and Italy, later Germany (the land of Luther!) and Europe. Even in our own country, we learn that Orthodox Lutheranism came to the Eastern United States where Lutherans first immigrated, then the Central United States, such as Missouri, the heart of the once-orthodox Missouri Synod!

Let us beware, be alert, learn, and treasure the Word of God in our midst, lest we, too, lose it for ourselves and future generations. May we not become ***“a disobedient and obstinate people.”*** (Romans 10:21) We are really ***“without excuse:”*** (Romans 1:20 KJV)

So what excuses have you heard lately? What’s your excuse? Or what excuses have you heard lately even in your own head? May we appreciate the blessings of the Gospel and not reject it. May we examine the excuses we try to use before God so that we don’t lose the banquet and be excluded. Amen.

Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, Oct. 11, 2015