

The Wedding Feast

Preached on The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Oct. 17, 2021
Text: Matt. 22: 1-14

Our Gospel today is again about food. In Trinity Season alone eight of the Gospels are about eating and drinking. Food brings people together. Good memories often involve meals with family and loved ones. We generally don't eat with someone we find repellant because meals are morally charged. Good Jews did not have table fellowship with Gentiles. Pharisees would not eat with those they considered disreputable or "unclean." Eating together is something that you do with people with whom you want to strengthen bonds, not break them. Imagine deciding to break off a serious relationship over a meal—not good for the digestion. And, of course, it's difficult to overestimate the importance of eating and drinking together for the life of the Church. The Lord's Supper was instituted at a meal, and to this day our most important sacrament involves Christ giving us his very self as Food and Drink.

Today's parable is quite similar to the one we encountered on The Second Sunday of Trinity from St. Luke, with a few differences. Did Jesus tell this parable twice, or did one of the Evangelists alter the wording, location, and time for his own teaching purposes? We cannot know for sure. But it occurs twice in our Prayer Book's Sunday Gospel readings, so perhaps we need to take it seriously. After all, this parable figures prominently in the Exhortation to those who would receive Holy Communion, found on pages 86-89 of the Book of Common Prayer.

About 34 years ago there was a beautiful Danish movie called *Babette's Feast*, based on a story by Isaak Dineson, about an austere Protestant religious community in remote early nineteenth century Jutland in the north of Denmark. The story culminates with a glorious banquet prepared for the aging and by now spiritually hidebound community by Babette, an incredible French chef who has taken refuge there to escape political turbulence in France. What happens at this unlikely banquet is miraculous, as the guests, and a surprise visitor from the past, experience extraordinary reconciliation and peace as they dine together—truly the peace of God which passes all understanding.

This has always been the purpose of God, to bring different people from all nations to join in common worship and adoration, to enjoy the peace only found in Him. The prophet Isaiah's vision of the messianic banquet of the Lord runs from ancient Israel into the Church and continues this morning here in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. At the heart of our community is a banquet in which the people feast on the graces and riches of the King of Kings.

Of course, Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet focuses not on the food, drink and conversation of the banquet, but on the invitations of the king and the responses of those

invited. There are three acts in the parable's drama: two calls to those who were first on the list of invitations, and then an indiscriminate call to anyone, with a final sorting-out at the wedding party.

Assuming that this is a parable first about ancient Israel, the invited are presumably those whom the king would think of first, those who naturally would be high on the guest list—priests, scribes, nobles—Israel's leaders. These were called by the king's servants, "but they would not come." This causes a crisis, because everything is ready and the feast is at hand. The king issues a second call by more servants, and this time those invited make light of it all, go about their own business, and even respond with violence. It seems clear that the parable here speaks of the historic treatment of Israel's prophets by her rulers.

The military retaliation by the angry king is thought by most commentators to be the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in 70 A.D., either prophesied by Jesus, interpreted by Matthew, or both. But it could refer to earlier invasions, such as those by the Assyrians and Babylonians. The answer does not make a difference to the parable.

Now comes a fresh start in act three with a strange ending. Those on the king's list are replaced by a new invitation, and his servants are sent out into the thoroughfares to gather "as many as you find," "both bad and good." The wedding hall is now full of guests, and the king comes to have a look at them. One is a man without a wedding garment whom the king addresses, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" He is speechless, and the king tells his attendants to bind the man hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness, where "men will weep and gnash their teeth."

This climax has caused generations of church people to wonder about the king and to sympathize with the guest without a garment. After all, wasn't he brought in at the last minute? There was no time to rent a tux. To make sense of this, we are forced to consider what the wedding garment is, as we also remember the nature of the messianic banquet. It is for those who truly honor their king, and are rightly grateful for his kindness, showing this through amendment of life, throwing off the dirty rags of sin and malice.

Worldly excuses for staying away from the wedding feast, just as excuses for staying away from Holy Communion, are born of ingratitude. But coming to Holy Communion unworthily, treating it lightly, with no intention to amend your life and let go of your favored sins, is dangerous. The marriage-garment required by God is not a tuxedo, but *a right spirit*; that is, a garment of humility, charity, and forgiveness. It is what we are wearing as we truly and earnestly repent of our sins, have love and charity towards our neighbor, and intend to live a new life, following God's commandments. We all spend our entire Christian lives becoming more at home in that garment and, by God's grace, finding that it fits better and better.

As it turns out, many are called to the banquet. The invitations begin with those the king thought to be his friends, but then wind up going out to everyone. Those first invited showed themselves to be careless of the things of God. They were the leaders, the

religious establishment, who knew a thing or two about how things get done. They had no time for this Kingdom of God stuff, just as most have no time for it today.

So this old guard was replaced by “the bad and the good” from the highways and byways, those who have a better grip on their natural unworthiness. These are the ones who know who they are, and therefore come with a humble and penitent heart. The expulsion of the guest without the garment is harsh and unjust if it is merely a sartorial matter. But if it is a matter of spiritual clothing, an issue determined by the state of the heart and discerned by the Lord, then it is in truth *self-expulsion*. We each finally decide if we want to attend the banquet or not.

Many are called to the banquet of the Kingdom; but, as Jesus observes, few are chosen. Although the king’s invitation is a free act of kindness, participation in his feast demands our response. The old guard are not excused from this demand by their credentials. The new invitees are not excused either. To be invited is a gift of grace; to respond is a gift of grace as well. It is a gift to receive the invitation with a grateful and true heart, and to keep the feast with sincerity and truth. The invitation is universal, but participation is not automatic. What is necessary is openness to a grace in which we choose to take part.

Let us then not be those who presume upon the Lord. Let the failure of Israel’s leadership not be our failure. If we are chosen, then this comes with an obligation. Resting in self-satisfied complacency will reveal to the world how profoundly we have distorted our calling, just as Israel’s leaders distorted God’s charge to Abraham. God’s Promise to Abraham was a promise to the whole world, not only Israel. This fact is vividly portrayed in the blind and the lame, the unwashed and unwanted, coming to Jesus in the Temple. Those who consider themselves to be true children of Abraham, but do not share God’s heart, will be entirely excluded from the Kingdom of God, while those that they despise and shun as worthless will take their seats in the most important meal of all time.

Many are called, but few are chosen. The branch of Israel is broken from the Vine of Life and the Gentiles are engrafted. This is a warning against dispositions of the mind and heart that keep us out of God’s Kingdom—presumption, self-righteousness, contempt of those outside our tribe, and worldliness. Neither ideology, nor violence, nor lying, nor manipulation will save us, though it’s not from lack of trying. These are what reside in the world’s toolbox. But they will not save us.

Only God through Christ can. He has saved us, is saving us, and will save us. We are not being saved all alone, but together, members of the Holy Catholic Church, the Family of God, the Body of Christ. The Church Fathers declared without exception: “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”—“No salvation outside the Church.” We are saved, are being saved, and shall be saved together, as members of Christ our Lord, or not at all. We are to “put on Christ,” who becomes to us that wedding garment we need to enter the banquet. Through him, we become holy in our life together and a light to our pagan neighbors. We learn trust in and gratitude to God. We grow in confidence in his chosen

destiny for us, submission to his will, and mutual humility. Through him we can become representatives of God's true Kingdom.

In the Name...