

You're Invited

Text: Luke 14:15-24

Hymn: "What God Ordains Is Always Good" (LSB 760)

It's not uncommon this time of year to receive invitations. Invitations to high school and college graduations, invitations to weddings. Maybe you heard about the invitation that was in celebrity news a few weeks ago. Teresa Giudice, one of the stars of the "Real Housewives of New Jersey" (a program I've never seen on a cable channel I've never subscribed to) found out the hard way that a friend had leaked her and her fiancé's wedding invitation to the media, and within hours bad actors had created fake websites claiming to be the couple's official wedding registry. Because of an invitation.

How timely then that our Scripture reading for today is Jesus' parable about a man who gave a great banquet and sent out invitations. Jesus tells this parable while himself a guest at a banquet. Just before this, Jesus has healed one of the guests, taught the importance of humility, and told his Pharisee host to invite people who can't return the favor—the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Then one of the dinner guests says, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Now comes Jesus' story about a banquet to which the invitees refuse to come.

And it doesn't take a theology degree to figure out what Jesus is talking about. The banquet host is God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth. He has prepared a truly great banquet, where the food and drink are different and greater than any ever served at an ordinary party. But the guests, like those in Jesus' original audience,, spurn the invitation. Which is to say, *You* are invited to the great banquet. Do you know? Do you care? When you go to a banquet, what do you do? You don't sit around and watch other people. You don't play with your food. When you go to a banquet, you

eat and drink. That's what a banquet is for. Jesus in the Beatitudes says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." What are you hungry for? Jesus in John 6 equates faith with eating and drinking. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Are you hungry and thirsty for eternal life? Or is the invitation to the great banquet just not that big of a deal?

Today Jesus is teaching the Pharisees, the scribes, the teachers of the law, those who have puffed themselves up, those who think themselves too important, too busy to listen to Jesus. But He's teaching us as well. How easy it is for us to lose our hunger and thirst for the things that are really important. Many Christians who once hungered and thirsted for Christ's righteousness have lost their appetite. It's just not that big of a deal any more. Maybe they don't believe any more God's threat to punish all those who are outside the kingdom, those who disobey His commandments. Maybe they think they're good enough on their own: I'm a pretty good person, especially in comparison to all those other not-so-good people, those jerks *out there*. Maybe their hearts aren't convicted of what we confess nearly every Sunday: "I, a poor, miserable sinner." Besides, there is so much to divert our attention. There are so many things going on each and every day—who has time to give God and the life to come any thought?

Are you hungry and thirsty? What are you hungry and thirsty for? The Gospel for many of us leaves us cold, because we have no spiritual hunger and thirst, and our lack of hunger and thirst is a sign that we are not healthy.

In our text today, after the call has gone out, "Come, for everything is now ready!" they all alike begin to make excuses. The first says to him, "I bought a field; I must go out and see it." The next, "I have bought five yoke of oxen; I need to test-drive them."

The third, "I have married a wife; therefore I cannot come." And they're so polite about it, too: "Please have me excused." But the bottom line was that for each of them it just wasn't that important. Why? Because their money, their job, and their family came first.

Now God does not want you to renounce your money, your job, and your family. He just doesn't want you to worship them. These are all gifts from God, gifts to be used in service to one another and in love toward God. These are all gifts. But when we turn them into reasons we won't spend time with God Himself, the gifts have become idols.

I told you about the time the young man in the grocery store asked what church I was the pastor of. After telling him about Our Redeemer, I then asked him where he went. And he said, "We used to go to such-and-such church but since Dad stopped believing in God, we all stay home on Sunday to keep the family together." I'm also old enough to remember the 1981 Academy Award-winning *Chariots of Fire*, based on a true story about the 1924 Olympics. A Christian named Eric Liddell, one of the fastest runners in his day, decided not to compete in three races he was likely to medal in because it would mean running on a Sunday. The two races that were not on a Sunday? In the 200-meter he earned the bronze; in the 400-meter he set a world record. What a loser, right? Meanwhile what do we skip church for? The other day someone showed me an Internet meme of a church sign with the message, "There is a 0.0296% your child will become a professional athlete. There is a 100% chance your child will stand before the throne of God." (I thought it was too heavy-handed and so decided not to include it in the sermon this morning.) But it's true, isn't it?

We Bible-believing Lutheran Christians like to whine and complain about how our society is going to hell in a hand-basket. And it is, and we should recognize it and talk

about it and work to do something about it. But isn't it ironic that at the same time morals are going down, Christians are staying away from church in droves. Church attendance in America is less than 50% today of what it was twenty-five years ago (and that's a pre-COVID number!). You'd think Christians would be in God's house crying out to God. Instead we too often say, "There will always be another Sunday morning service. It's not that big of a deal." And like frogs in water brought to boil slowly, we gradually fall from the faith.

That's what God's Word is teaching us today—to be careful, to be on guard, not to take, as Jesus' fellow dinner guest did, "eating bread in the kingdom of God" for granted. Because Jesus continues to invite you to come and to eat and to drink at the banquet, where the primary food at the banquet is not the Law. We cannot make ourselves right with God by cleaning up our act or coming up with ten steps for better living. The primary message at the banquet, the main course, in fact, is Jesus Himself—Jesus who came into this sin-filled world because He knew we needed saving. We may not always recognize it, but God did and so He took the initiative. He sent Jesus into the world to take all our pride and self-righteousness and idolatry and apathy, all our sins, into Himself on the Cross, once and for all. And what makes His salvation all the more amazing is that Jesus doesn't charge us for it. He just gives it out; it's free. No gift registries for this celebration: All Jesus wants is for you to show up, to take His invitation at face value, that He really wants you in His house and to eat, to drink, to be glad. You couldn't possibly pay Him back, and He doesn't want you to. Just come to the banquet. Come and be satisfied.

I know a lot of us wonder, What can I do to get my kids to come back to church? What can I do so my grandchildren will love the Gospel? What can I do so young and old and everybody in between will have a hunger and thirst for Jesus' righteousness? Maybe big screens. Maybe a karaoke-style service. Maybe a coffee bar. Then God's Word breaks in and says, "Stop it!" It's not about how entertaining or witty or gimmicky we become. It's about how we, the children of God, can be faithful so that the banquet meal that we serve is pure and delicious. You want to know why people don't come to church? It is as simple as this: They do not see themselves as poor, crippled, blind, and lame. People who have their act together or think they do or pretend they do don't need God. They don't need forgiveness.

But when we see ourselves as poor in the things of God, even though we may be rich in the things of the world, then we have a hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. When we see that we are crippled and lame, having been attacked and beat up by the consequences of our sins and the sins of the world, then we hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. When we see ourselves as spiritually blind to the things that God has, and that our eyes must be opened by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God.

So, come to the feast, all of you, don't-have-your-act-together-sinners! Come and eat and drink. Come to the feast. Hear the Word of God. You have family over for the week? Bring them to church with you. Teach them the importance of eating and drinking at Christ's heavenly banquet. You have any friends? Invite, encourage, compel. The banquet hall has room. The feast is ready. Come and eat. Amen.

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