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Pentecost 20

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Clothed with Christ, You have a Seat”

Text: Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:4-13; Isaiah 25:6-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

So the past four weeks we’ve been hearing about and considering what the kingdom of heaven is like, primarily through the parables of Jesus. That it is a kingdom of lavish forgiveness, of unbounded generosity, of relentless love, and of a new way of living and thinking. It’s not about rules, as so many think of Christianity these days, but of grace. Of gifts. Of God doing everything He can for us, and then some. For it is a kingdom first and foremost not of what we do for God, but of what He does for us. And that what He does for us changes us. His forgiveness making us forgiving. His love making us loving. His generosity making us generous. His mercy making us merciful. A kingdom we live in not only in the future, but already here and now. Now, though not yet in its fullness. Truly a kingdom unlike any other.

And today we finish up our consideration of all this with the final parable in this series, the Parable of the Wedding Feast. After this, after Jesus finishes up all this teaching, the Jewish leaders are going to step up their challenges of Him. They are going to probe and confront and ask Him questions and what they think are unanswerable riddles to discredit Him and mock Him and bring both Him and whatever He thinks His kingdom is, down. But they will fail. He will answer them all. Until finally, in their desperation, they get rid of Him not with their words but with the wood and nails of a Roman crucifixion.

Which is where our final parable for today begins. For I don’t know if you noticed this or remembered from last week . . . but last week’s parable, the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard, ended with the son dead. Those who wanted the vineyard for themselves killed him. But this week’s parable begins with the son alive and well. And not only alive and well, but ready for his wedding feast!

Hmmm. Do you see? Dead, now alive. Rejected, now honored. Sorrow, now rejoicing. Think those two parables in a row are a coincidence? Probably not, right? For this is *what the kingdom of heaven is like*. The death of the son that leads to the joy of the feast.

And once again, things are not as we expect. Those who are invited don't show up. Some have better things to do. Some are too busy. Some don't like the king. But still the king wants them there! So just like last week, he doesn't give up. He sends more servants to tell them to come! And just like last week they not only refuse, they turn hostile, seizing, mistreating, and killing the servants. And the king deals with them.

But as we've seen these past few weeks, that's not what he wants to do! The judgment, the condemnation, this is what he is *compelled* to do, but not what he *wants* to do. What he *wants* to do is rejoice in his son. So he sends out more servants to fill the wedding hall with guests. It doesn't matter who they are. It doesn't matter where they find them. Anybody can come! If you were walking and breathing, you had a seat. Whether you were **bad or good**, you had a seat. No matter which side of the tracks you lived on, you had a seat.

And in the end, it is as the king wants: the wedding hall is filled with guests. And all those people, there for the feast, have only one thing in common. One thing: *that the king wanted them there*. The king who wanted only to share his joy with them and have them feast with him. And if you looked around that room that day, you would see what you see as you look around this room today . . . all kinds of people. Folks from both sides of the tracks, so to speak. PhDs and GEDs. Shameful sinners and "respectable" sinners. Old timers and youngsters. Those raised in the church and those new to it. People with nothing in common, nothing really, but this: *the king*. The king who wants to share his joy with you and have you feast with him.

For that's *what the kingdom of heaven is like*.

And nothing was going to stop this feast! Not those who tore up their invitations. Not those who hated and killed. Not the king having to deal with his rebellious people. The feast would go on. The king's joy was too great.

For this is the feast the prophet Isaiah talked about, prophesied. The feast so long in coming. The feast that is prepared when **death is swallowed up forever** and **the Lord wipes away tears from all faces** and there is only joy. The feast for the king's son named Jesus, who was dead is alive again. Who swallowed death that we might feast on life. Who died on the cross for us that we might rise from the dead with Him. That we who mourn - mourn death, mourn our sin, mourn the disfunction of the world and the bad decisions we've made, mourn the strife that surrounds us and that we live in - that we who mourn all these things and more might rejoice in the forgiveness and new life of Jesus. These gifts of the son whose wedding feast of joy is not just waiting for us in heaven, but is here for us now.

Which is why you're here. Not to do something for God, but because He has a feast

for you here. A feast of forgiveness, life, and salvation. A feast of Word and Sacrament. A feast in the midst of a world of famine. A world where some people think they have better things to do than come here. Where some people are too busy to bother. Where some just don't like the king. God will have to deal with them in the end, but that's not what He wants to do. He wants them here at His feast, to rejoice in His Son with Him, and receive His gifts. With us. With us here and now, and forever.

But Jesus' parable didn't end there. There's one more bit . . . this matter of the guest who got in ***without a wedding garment***. It's a strange ending to the parable, don't you think? For how *did* he get in? Why didn't anyone stop him? Why didn't the servants notice and do something about it? Why did no one else say anything to him? It's like the king was the only one who could see the wedding garments and that this guest didn't have one. Everyone else seemed surprised, even the one without the wedding garment, who was speechless. Who thought he was okay . . .

Maybe this ending scares you . . . like, that might be you! But I don't think this ending was put here to scare us, but to comfort us. To assure us that whether you are among the bad guests or the good guests that have been brought into the wedding hall, you have a place here. Because bad or good is not what the king sees or points out or seems to care about! What mattered was the wedding garment. Are you clothed properly? And if you are, you are welcome. There is seat for you.

So what is it? What is it that clothes us, that covers us, so that what we have done, bad or good, is not what God sees? That what we have done or not done is not the reason we are welcome or not? Because if it was, then there wouldn't be both bad and good there - only good, right? (*And then not us!*) So what is it that has covered us all and given us a place in the king's feast? The Scriptures are clear. There's only one thing: when we are clothed with Christ by grace through faith.

Whenever we try to clothe ourselves, it never works out well for us. Remember Adam and Eve? They tried to clothe themselves with fig leaves, but by even trying to clothe themselves they just shone a magnifying glass on their sin! And if we try to clothe ourselves in our good works, you know, make ourselves look good . . . well, two things to say about that. First, I'll use a modern day saying: *that's like putting lipstick on a pig!* It just doesn't work. But even better is what the same prophet Isaiah we heard from earlier also said, that all the things we do that we think are so good? They're still stained with sin. They're like filthy rags compared to Christ's righteousness (Isaiah 64:6).

So if you look at yourself, at what you have done, if you've been bad or good, and measure yourself that way, you'll either think you don't belong here, that you're

wedding garment isn't good enough; or have a false confidence that you do - like the guest in the parable.

So don't do that! And that's not you. Because you, you have been clothed with Christ. Who you are, what you have done, has been covered by Christ and His forgiveness. Your good works didn't get you in here, and your sins don't get you tossed out. What matters is that by grace through faith, you have been clothed with Christ. You have a robe of righteousness that is not your own, but has been given to you in Baptism. You confessed all the sinful thoughts, words, deeds, and desires that welled up in you and from you this week, and were washed clean in the blood of the Lamb in the Absolution. And Christ will again feed you with His Body and Blood that in and with and under and on you, be Christ and His life.

And so we're not speechless here, like that guest in the parable. We speak. But what we speak is important! We confess our sins, we confess the Creed, and we confess the gifts that are here for us and given to us. That is to say, we rejoice in the Lord and receive what He gives. For that is what the kingdom of heaven is: a wedding feast of joy from the king for you.

And as we've been considering, *that changes you*. Receiving the Lord's joy and gifts here, you take that joy and those gifts with you, back to school, back to work, back to your homes . . . Which is what Paul was talking about in the reading from Philippians. **Rejoice in the Lord!** Receive His gifts! And then live in those gifts. Lives of peace and joy, thanksgiving and prayer, generosity and contentment. The life of Christ.

For the life of Christ, from the beginning of time to the end of time, from *the Shattered Bliss of Eden* (LSB #572) to the perfect bliss of heaven . . . the life of Christ - for you, in you, and through you . . . that's what the kingdom of heaven is all about.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.