

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:1-14

The King's Guests

There were several attempts to set roots for Christianity in Norway, but for the most part they had failed well into the tenth century. One king, Olaf, was sold into slavery as a child and travelled throughout Christian Europe. When he ascended to the throne, he was particularly determined to make civilized Christians of his subjects like those he'd met on his travels. So what did he do? We might assume he made a special effort to support the preaching of the gospel of our Lord, that the Holy Spirit might move hearts and minds to faith, and to be fair, he did support preaching, yet he was not necessarily a patient man, and so came up with his own way of making Christians: he told his subjects they could either fight him or be baptized. Olaf was no man to do battle with, and so many Norwegians became Christians, at least in name, and frequently only in name.

He was not as successful in the northern part of his kingdom, however. Historically, northerners have often been a headstrong and hardy sort, and they weren't easily intimidated. Where brawn failed, however, Olaf used brains. At a great heathen festival in the north, he told the people that he was pondering becoming a heathen again, which pleased them, but added that for him to do so, he would have to offer a great and bloody sacrifice, and so he seized twelve of the leading men from the festival, which did not please them. Remember, human sacrifice was not unheard of in pagan worship. Amazingly, the leaders to be sacrificed and the people who loved them, who had previously rejected Christianity, suddenly decided that they would like to become Christians. The king had succeeded, but had he really? He died in battle a few years later. He who converted by the sword was killed by the sword. And one wonders how many true Christians he left behind through his work. History attests that the Christianity that truly took hold in Norway was not that instilled by force, but that worked by the preaching and teaching of missionaries and pastors.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son." And it was quite the feast. The king couldn't imagine that anyone wouldn't want to come. But what do we read? [He] sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.

No one came. In fact, not only did they reject his invitation, but they even killed his servants. So what did the king do? He didn't force them to come, but He also wasn't in the market for excuses. They had been offered his gracious invitation, and if that wasn't enough, He could do no more for them. As Jesus says Abraham told the rich man who wanted the sainted Lazarus to go and warn his brothers about their unbelief, *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."* This king was no King Olaf of the Norwegians. He wasn't going to force conversions. What did he do, though? *"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."*

Those ungrateful men and women forever lost their chance to sit at the feast. The king would not force them into His presence, but He also wouldn't let their disobedience go unpunished. This is the fate of those who die without sorrowing over their sins or unwilling to repent of them, who reject the Lord's gifts of Word and Sacrament, unimpressed with or indifferent toward them, who get so lost in and distracted by the little things in life that they miss the big picture. The king didn't want them to be cast from his presence, but that was what they had chosen.

But what about the feast? Would it go unattended because those called first had refused to come? Did the king try to change things to, to put on a different feast that might prove better bait for guests? No, not at all? His feast was *the* feast, like it or not. The problem wasn't with the king or the gifts he'd set out. The problem was the stubbornness and hard-heartedness of those invited. So what did the king do? *"Then*

he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests."

The feast would be full. The question was just who would fill it. Those who at first seemed most worthy were not worthy after all. Those deemed unworthy at first were most worthy of all, because they recognized their unworthiness, rejoiced at such an invitation, and knew that it was not something to be passed up. Both bad and good, in other words, the unworthy and the even more unworthy, jumped at the chance, and the feast was full. These are the believers, the tax collectors and prostitutes turned saints, those who know their sins, confess them, and take advantage of the blessed opportunity to be cleaned up and declared worthy of the King, to have a seat at the Lord's table, to partake of His splendid meal.

But not everyone understood the significance of what had happened. One of them thought that since the king had invited him as an unwashed, slovenly, loutish man, he was now free to still be and remain his old, unwashed, slovenly, and loutish self. The king's presence soon didn't impress him anymore. He thought too highly of himself and too lowly of the king's kindness. He took his presence at the feast for granted, and wanted to mingle at this black tie event, not in the wedding clothes the king had generously provided, but in the swinish rags he'd polluted with his godless and reckless life. And what happened?

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen.

You have a spot at the feast. You are a believer. But have you taken off the robe of Christ's righteousness generously placed on you by the King of Kings? Have you polluted and stained it? Have you become so comfortable in the Lord's presence, so prideful, that you expect Him to be impressed with the swinish rags of a godless and reckless life, for Him to wink at your lust or greed, to nod at your jealousy or grudges, to laugh with you at your vulgar jokes or overlook your unbiblical lifestyle?

Have you heard about the big controversy surrounding Marcus Jordan, the son of the basketball star Michael Jordan? Marcus is a freshman guard on Central Florida's basketball team. They have a contract with Adidas, to wear their shoes in their games. Marcus' father, however, is a Nike man. Perhaps you've heard of Air Jordans. So Marcus is refusing to wear the Adidas shoes. The school stands to lose three million dollars from the contract with Adidas because of him. It is a question of loyalty, I guess.

If people can take stands like that over shoes, how much more shouldn't we be holding our ground in our daily lives regarding our robe of Christ's righteousness? If people are that concerned about brand names, how much more shouldn't we be concerned with the biblical teachings we as a confessional Lutheran church hold? We have much more to lose than millions, yet have we been silent or gone along with the conversation when people claim every religion or denomination is the same, that it really doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe something, as if the wedding garment, Christ's righteousness, were but an option and not a requirement for God's eternal feast? Where did that attitude get the man who took his spot at the feast for granted? There is one feast, one invitation, one acceptable garment, one King and one Son.

Unworthy though we are, we have a spot at the feast, and the Lord who provided our robes will wash them clean again through His Absolution when we repent. What a turn of events for fallen sinners, all because of a great and bloody sacrifice, not of heathen leaders who refuse to convert, but of God Himself, offered to make the heathen His own, not by force, but through the compelling power of His dying yet undying love. You've been invited. Who cares if others were unimpressed and refused to come? You are the King's guests, dressed in the King's righteousness. Never forget that. Never take that for granted. Amen.