

## **Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 11, 2020**

### **Introduction**

***In today's Gospel, we again join Jesus in Jerusalem just prior to the Passover.*** In what would be the last week of his life, the parables Jesus tells become far more pointed in their critique of the religious establishment. The priests [Temple clergy], the scribes, and the Pharisees agree that Jesus is a threat to their power to determine how the people should worship God. In fact, they looked for ways to entrap him so that they might have him arrested for blasphemy and killed.

***The Parable of the Great Banquet was not well received by the religious leaders because it challenged the authenticity of their piety and position.*** This parable of judgment explores the consequences of not responding to God's invitation to live as a covenant people.

***Today's parable challenges us so think about the invitation that comes to us through the words of Jesus.*** How will we respond? Are there excuses that trump the urgent invitation? Jesus leaves the reader with a challenge: ***What will you do?***

### **Call Process**

***As you are aware from last week's pastoral note, the Bethel-Immanuel Lutheran Parish's Ministry Site Profile has been completed and sent the NE MN and the ELCA for distribution to interested candidates.*** I am aware that our profile has been sent to at least one candidate. Our presidents are in the process of finalizing our call committee. Please contact either Jerry or Brian if you wish to serve on this very important committee.

***It is important to remember that this is a candidate's market.*** This means that each candidate may well have the choice of several parishes/churches as they interview. It is important to trust the workings of the Holy Spirit as we seek a pastor. God will provide for this parish. I encourage you to pray for our churches, our possible candidates, and the call committee as they begin their work.

### **Worship**

***Our upcoming outdoor worship services will be on October 11 and 25.*** We will follow the same format that we have in August and September. My family and I have decided that we will be taking some time off during the month of November. However, I will continue to write weekly meditations for distribution by email, snail mail, Facebook, and our web pages.

**As I write this, you are certainly aware of the surge in Covid-19 infections in our area. Minnesota is one of four Midwestern states that are now considered to be infection hotspots.** Personally, I am reticent about going into closed spaces. Please be careful. Wear your masks, practice social distancing, and do not go into confined spaces if at all possible. As evidenced by the positive test readings among many of our political leaders, the coronavirus is no respecter of age or position.

**In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve**

### **Gospel – Matthew 22.1-14**

**<sup>1</sup>Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup>“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. <sup>4</sup>Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>5</sup>But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup>while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.**

**<sup>7</sup>The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. <sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests**

**<sup>11</sup>“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, <sup>12</sup>and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ <sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.”**

### **“The Invitation Conundrum”**

**Let us pray.** Dearest Father, you are gracious and it is your desire that all people come to the banquet of life. You invite us through Word and Sacrament and you call us with your Holy Spirit to live lives in fellowship with you and with each other.

**But Lord, we are often reluctant disciples who choose their own priorities over those of the Kingdom.** We see neither our own peril nor the death that most certainly awaits

us. Forgive our stubborn procrastination and open our hearts to your invitation that calls us from death to life. We pray in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Lord, amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Conundrum – A word not used in everyday conversation.** A quick look at the dictionary provides these definitions: *a riddle whose answer involves a pun or a question having only a conjectural answer . . . Often referring to a problem that is difficult and counter-intuitive, appearing to have no solution.* This was a bit more than I anticipated when I used ‘conundrum’ in my sermon title. But in a way, I think that invitations can become conundrums for us because of conflicts between our social obligations and our desire to do as we will. Let me explain.

**Invitations are a part of our lives.** Just think of the invitations you and your families receive: invitations centered around family events like baptisms, birthdays, confirmations, bridal showers, weddings; invitations to dinners at the homes of friends; invitations to join various organizations; even invitations from companies to use their credit cards, buy their magazines, and bank at their institutions. Although they differ in importance, the invitations all have something in common. They want an answer: Will you come? Will you join? Will you buy? If so, please answer.

**We are inundated with invitations.** It is often hard to know which to accept and which to reject. Sometimes we get personal invitations that are a bit mysterious. There are times when Vicki and I have been invited to weddings in the Twin Cities where we have, at best, a passing acquaintance with the families involved. We wonder, ‘Why us?’

**I think that is why people today do not take an invitation’s RSVP request seriously anymore.** Perhaps there is a lack of interest. Or perhaps schedules or other commitments preclude participation. When I do premarital counseling, the most common complaint I hear from couples as the date of their wedding approaches is that their guests do not RSVP and indicate their intentions. It seems as if they don’t care enough to respond. Not only does it make planning difficult, it is a breach of common courtesy and respect.

**But there are invitations that demand an answer.** Some of us received those infamous letters from the government that began with the words, ‘Greetings from the President of the United States . . .’ In the days before the volunteer Army of today, this was the beginning of letters to young men telling them to report for physicals and military service. Believe me, a response was required. Similarly, letters from the Internal

Revenue Service also demand a response when they ‘invite’ you to an audit. Invitations from the IRS for an audit generally mean trouble on a tax return you have filed. Again they demand a response. But this is nothing new. Apparently the people of Jesus’ day were also inundated with invitations . . . Invitations that required an RSVP. To not respond was an affront to the sender of the invitation as was the case in the *Parable of the Great Banquet*.

***This parable is the third in a series of Kingdom-parables told by Jesus during the last week of his life.*** Recall that Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the cheers of thousands who shouted, ‘***Hosanna to the Son of David!***’ and then covered the road in front of him with palm branches. But Jesus’ popularity with the crowds was not shared by the teachers and elders of the people; *especially after he drove their moneychangers from the courtyard of the Temple.* Jesus’ actions caused a series of confrontations and arguments with the religious leaders of Israel. They looked for ways to entrap him so that they might have him arrested and killed. *The Parable of the Great Banquet* was not well received by the religious leaders because it challenged the authenticity of their piety and more important, their power. This parable of judgment explores the consequences of not responding to God's invitation to live as the people of God.

***In the words of Jesus, the Kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who gives a wedding banquet for his son.*** It was the custom of the day to send the formal invitations to the guests well before the banquet. Then, when the day of the banquet arrived and all was in readiness, the host sent out his servants to personally tell the guests that the banquet was about to begin.

***The story takes an unpleasant turn when those who were invited would not come.*** Again, the king sent his servants saying, ‘***Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.***’ But the guests made light of the invitations and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized the king's servants and killed them. In anger, the king sent troops and destroyed their cities. Then he said to his servants, ‘***The wedding feast is ready, but those who are invited are not worthy. Go out into the streets and invite to the marriage feast as many as you can find.***’ So the servants went out and did as the king commanded, and brought in all whom they found, both the good and the bad, until the wedding hall was filled.

***When the king came in to join his guest at the banquet, he found one man who was not wearing a festive garment.*** He said, ‘***Friend, how did you get here.***’ When the man did

not answer, the king ordered him bound and cast into the outer darkness. And Jesus said, **'FOR MANY ARE CALLED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN.'**

***At first reading, we who are church members, tend to use our 'Get Out of Jail Free' card and go on with our lives as if this parable is about 'those other people' who are on the outside.*** After all, we come to worship when possible. We put as much in the collection plate as we think we can afford. We take part in the church activities and we pray. *What else can we do?* This parable is about those who do far less . . . Those who turn from God and put themselves on the outside.

***But a word of caution is in order.*** Jesus targets the parable at the religious people of his day . . . The people who take their petty pieties so seriously that there is no room for God and the promises of life. Jesus stuns his hearers by saying, **'FOR MANY ARE CALLED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN.'** *The Parable of the Great Banquet* challenges the hearer to respond to the life-giving invitation of God. **RSVP or ELSE!**

***A closer look at the parable reveals that it is not about the wedding or the king's punishment of those who refuse to come.*** That old, faulty line of reasoning brings us back to the idea of keeping score: *the less sin we commit, the better we are, and the better God likes us.* If we do well and honor God by coming to the feast, it follows that we will receive tangible blessings in this world and eternal life in the next. Makes sense to us, but it runs counter the grace of God.

***It seems to me that the focus of the parable is the recalcitrance of the wedding guests to honor the king's invitation.*** They all have legitimate excuses: a new business to look after; a new bride; a new farm – All endeavors that need attention. They are grateful for the invitation, but they just have other things to do; things that appear to be more important at the time. In my reading, this parable challenges one's sense of priorities. *What is really important in our lives? How do we make decisions? When push comes to shove, will we choose God's way or our way?*

***Choices are not always easy.*** Most the time they are very difficult and they run counter to the world. But to heed the invitation of Jesus is to see him as Lord of our lives, and ourselves as sinners who need his help. To heed the invitation of Jesus is to take up our crosses and follow him; even if it means going all the way to Jerusalem, the place of suffering and death

***We live in a world where power, wealth, and success give meaning to life.*** These forces shape our lives. And by nature, we want nothing to do with a suffering Messiah. The idea of a Messiah who is powerless, poor, and unsuccessful makes us very

uncomfortable. Make no mistake, those who follow Jesus must be prepared to share in his suffering. To take up one's cross means to put ourselves at risk to further the ministry of a Messiah whose life is marked by suffering. Maybe that is why the invitation is not accepted. Maybe that's why we have got other things to do. Maybe we prefer seven easy steps to gain 'the victorious life' and earn our eternal reward. So, rather than answer the invitation, it is far safer to not RSVP and forget the whole thing.

***But there's a word of grace in this parable also.*** The king is insistent that all the places at the banquet table be filled. After the first guests refuse, he sends his servants out onto the highways of the world with new invitations. This time, there are no requirements. You don't even have to know the king and his son to be invited to the wedding. All you need is an appetite for a good party. The only thing all these people have in common is that they have accepted the king's invitation to come.

***But what of the unlucky man without the festive garment? Why was he thrown out? And what of the king? Isn't he being a bit capricious and untrustworthy?*** His actions seem contrary to his gracious invitation. If the king is not concerned with whom he invites, why is he concerned with what that person is wearing? When asked how he got in without wearing a festive garment for the wedding, the man did not answer. So the king had him bound and thrown into the outer darkness.

***Christians have been arguing about the man without the festive garment for years.*** Some say it symbolizes the righteousness of Christ; others talk about it as baptism; and still others understand the festive garment as a willingness to live a more spiritual life. But each of these answers smell of our old *tit-for-tat* legalism that allows us to make our own case before God.

***Again, Fr. Robert Capon has influenced my thinking.*** Listen carefully to what God says to the person without the festive garment, ***'HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?'*** What if that is the same question each of us is asked when we must give that final accounting of our lives? After we die, what if we are at the banquet of life and God asks each of us, ***'HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?'*** If that is the case, there is only one answer that works. ***Winner or loser, each of us must say, 'I was invited.' No conundrum here. Any other answer will get us thrown out . . . Amen.***