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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 25:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Monday Evening Bible Class we have completed our introduction and overview of the Holy Gospel According to St. Mark. We are going to skip the next two Mondays and then pick up again on October 27 by looking at Chapter One. One of the interesting things we will be able to see immediately is that there was a significant difference between John the Baptist and Jesus when it comes to the location of their work. John the Baptist set himself down in a particular location, and the world came running to him:

And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:5, KJV)

That would be sweet, if, for example, all the world came running to Immanuel Lutheran Church, to be baptized and to learn the faith of the church.

But most churches grow by way of the method of Jesus, not John the Baptist. Jesus was a wandering preacher. He moved along from village to village, town to town. He mixed himself in with the folk and tried to draw them to himself. Likewise, here at Immanuel, or in any Christian congregation, our most likely way of success to win souls to Christ and to teach them the faith of the church is for you and me out there in the world to invite people to come and see our Savior Jesus. There are other methods we can use too, like our big yellow sign along our scaffold and ads in the newspaper and perhaps directed mailings to nearby apartment buildings inviting children to our Sunday School. But I suspect you and I will always be the best missionaries for our church when we gently speak up for Jesus when the time seems right.

So Jesus was an itinerant preacher. He would enter a village, preach there, perhaps heal some people, or grant forgiveness to someone, but then he would move on. For the most part, he had only middling success. The people were fickle. Sometimes they followed Jesus with great enthusiasm. Sometimes they lost interest and returned to their own concerns. Sometimes, they concluded that Jesus was a trouble maker and a threat and so they began to plot how they could get rid of him. By the time Jesus gets to Jerusalem, his congregation is pretty small: some women who would prove loyal to him and his twelve disciples, one of whom will deny him, one of whom will betray him, and all of whom will abandon him and flee from him.

THOSE INDIFFERENT TO THE INVITATION

In today's Gospel story, we find that the King is not pleased by this comparative indifference to his Son. Fr. Leonard Klein, former Associate Pastor here at Immanuel, in his commentary on today's parables says that Jesus speaking these particular parables falls under the category of "how to get yourself killed."¹ Jesus is in Jerusalem by this point – the city where he will die. These parables are not likely to please too many people.

In fact, there is death and destruction everywhere we look in these parables. In the first part of the story, the King prepares a banquet and invites the kind of folks you could expect at a banquet: righteous, respected folks, leaders of the community. But they decline to come, make light of the invitation, and in the end "seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them" (Matthew 22:6, RSV) How did the King respond to this? Well, he responded pretty much as you would expect a King to respond:

⁷The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

I mean to return to this fierce anger of the King later in this sermon. I will seek an Gospel interpretation of that anger.

So, that's what happens to those who refuse to come to the banquet: the king sends his troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city.

THE ONE WITHOUT THE WEDDING GARMENT

But what happens to the man who does come to the banquet but fails to wear the wedding garment is somehow even worse. That fellow is not simply "destroyed," which could mean extinguished like a candle being snuffed out. No, what happens to this fellow has the sound of ongoing torment about it:

Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matthew 21:13, RSV)

Do you see what I mean when I say that these two parables are not likely to please people who reject Jesus? These two parables suggest that those who are indifferent to Jesus are in for some troubles.

Let's focus on the second fellow – the man without the wedding garment. I've always liked this simple definition of a "parable": It is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." In this case, the earthly story is about a banquet, and the heavenly meaning is about the church. This fellow has heard the invitation to join the church and he has done so. He is there at the wedding banquet. I imagine that

¹ Leonard Klein, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, page 126.

he has been properly baptized. He has not burst down the door and forced his way in. He is simply there, looking around. Maybe he enjoys the food. I can hardly believe that what ails him is that he is a sinner, for if the sinners end up in the outer darkness with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, then we are all in trouble. The church is composed of both sinners and saints, and often we seem to slide between those two camps.

Rev. Timothy Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church here in New York City hopes that visitors to his church or any church will not be too discouraged to find sinners and hypocrites within the church. Rev. Keller says that that is simply the way the church is: it is not a club for saints but a hospital for sinners. The church is that location in life where, as bad as we might be, we have a chance to become better.

So what ails this man without the wedding garment is not that he is a sinner, lest each of us be excluded. No, what seems to be wrong is that he is *sour*. I am not referring now to his personality. Some folks are perpetually downhearted. They seem to have learned speech patterns that emphasize the negative. For them, the glass is always half empty rather than half full.

But that is not what I am talking about. I am not talking about a sour personality, but rather someone who has failed to grasp that the church is a banquet. And life in Christ is a banquet. It is a festival. It is a reason to be happy. It is a reason to think that life has improved. Indeed, it is reason for you and me to think that we have stumbled upon a way of life that is a better way of life than we have ever known before. What ails the man is that he has not clothed himself in Christ. He has not taken on Jesus as his image of a good and full human life. He is there, but he is there as someone who doesn't get it. Alas, he is not going to be a very good witness for Christ, for he is indifferent to Christ. He imagines that he can mix in the Church, but care little for Jesus. He does not wear the wedding garment.

Yesterday, the Wartburg, where my wife, Carol, is chaplain, celebrated its initial liturgy of thanksgiving at the start of its 150th anniversary. That liturgy was part of a day-long celebration called the Wartburg Festival. Part of the fun of the day for me was simply watching my wife dance with the Zumba exercise teachers, with the loud music sounding forth, and the colorful costumes, and Carol's long, slender arms swinging in the air and urging people to join in the dance. She knows how to party. This parable is something like this: what ailed the man without the wedding garment is that he did not realize that he had stumbled into a good way of life when he entered the church. He was too sour.

At the liturgy there at the Wartburg, Carol had included a paragraph from Rev. Gottlieb C. Berkemeier, from some writings of his back in 1920. Rev. Berkemeier was Director of the Wartburg Orphans' Farm School for thirty-five years. He was a great man. Carol and I hope to meet that man someday in heaven. The passage Carol quoted talks about childhood and how it ought to be a good time, even for the orphans there at the Farm School:

We thank God that we can make life so pleasant and joyful here for our children. It is our duty and constant endeavor. Youth, golden youth, ought to be happy, is made to be so. Dull, pleasureless youth is only another name for disease and oppression. Youth comes twice to none... The merry laugh, the bright smile, the rejoicing spirits are gifts of God, to be encouraged and not suppressed, and instead of arresting the child's sportfulness, it is far better to become a child among the children, go forth and help them trundle the hoop, and fly the kite, and build the snow-man, and join our voices with theirs.²

So, it should be with all the *children* of God, whether we are young or old. We should not view following Jesus to be a dull, pleasureless thing, but we should be more like happy children in the company of a grown-up who really loves us – the Grown-up who really loves us. I mean Jesus.

And then I offer this final thought about the man without the wedding garment. The strange and wonderful thing about this parable is that in its earthly meaning, you and I are not simply guests at the wedding banquet, but are something happier: we are the ones being married. To use the old language, the church is the “bride of Christ.” To be baptized is to become united with Jesus Christ, so that henceforth he loves us “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health” but no longer subject to the qualification, “till we are parted by death,” because Jesus will not let even that happen to us! And my theory is that any one who enters into holy marriage and does not understand that life has changed, that it has gotten better, simply fails to understand what has happened. And if the one you have married is Jesus Christ, then to not even imagine that you have new hope in this world and that a new way of life is now appropriate, well, that is outrageous!

And the king's frustration with this man is very great:

¹³Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” (Matthew 22:13, RSV)

THE KING'S WRATH

Again, I think it is time to speak of the king's wrath. I hope to give a Gospel interpretation of this anger. Let's begin by considering a case of Jesus entering a certain village, being rejected and moving on. It was a Samaritan village. The text says that the people would not receive Jesus because he was on his way to

² Rev. Gottlieb C. Berkemeier, October 1920

Jerusalem. So, Jesus simply moves on. But two of his disciples, James and John, called the Sons of Thunder, are offended by the resistance of the village to Jesus:

⁵⁴And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:54-56, RSV)

Here we see that Jesus is much more gentle with the people than his disciples are inclined to be. It was as if Jesus was saying, “Well, they are not ready for me. They have their reasons. Let’s leave them in peace. Maybe we will have more success some other time.”

Better still are the actual words of Jesus spoken on another occasion:

¹²What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:12, NRSV)

Here Jesus is teaching us something about the King – your Father in heaven: he does not desire that any one of these little ones should perish. I imagine that he includes the man without the wedding garment in this saying.

And then we have the fundamental principles concerning our God:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

And we have Jesus own description of his ministry on earth:

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10, RSV)

Altogether, I think we do best to interpret the anger of the king in today’s parables not as a permanent desire to destroy, but rather as the desperation of love. I think you know something about that – the desperation of love. Anyone who has had to look on as a loved one is destroying himself or herself has known that desperation. If you could change things, you would. And the point of today’s story

is that God can! He does not have to abide this world's indifference to Jesus. Indeed, his love is such that it is irresistible, so that one day that happy verse will surely come true:

¹⁰...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:10-11, RSV)\

Another way to look at what I am called a “Gospel interpretation” of the King’s wrath is to consider this Sunday’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 25. It also is a passage about a banquet. Isaiah promises that someday a banquet will be held which will not be simply fun, but an essential blessing for the people, for at that banquet death itself will be overcome:

⁸He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces... (Isaiah 25:8, RSV)

At that banquet, the tyranny of death shall cease. Death has been galloping along through the centuries, across the lands, ravenous for souls, eating every one in sight. But the church, including our little church here at Lexington Avenue and 88th Street, is the beginning of the end of death. That is why our God wants no one to come to church and to miss out on the life that is promised here.

I mean a more abundant life in this present life and eternal life in the world to come. If we come to church for other reasons, that is okay. But let us never miss out on this reason: Here in church, amidst the word of God and in fellowship with Jesus in the Holy Sacrament, we have available to us a new way of life. We need not come to church and leave unchanged. We can come to church and seek to wear our wedding garments. We can seek to become more and more enrobed with Christ, living a new life in him – a life that will prove a benefit to our neighbors now and will work its way out into everlasting life, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.