



Sunday Worship

October 11, 2020

*Draw near to God
for God is waiting for you.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

No special qualifications needed; no particular connections or exclusive memberships required; no secret passwords or unique attributes expected; no campaigning or canvassing, no examinations or reference checks; just an amazing invitation to a feast.

We will take our place, the place God has made for us alongside the other unworthy ones, the other beloved ones; the others humble enough to accept the invitation without asking who else will be there.

Well, Jesus, Lord of the Feast, with thankful and open hearts, we accept your amazing invitation.

OPENING PRAYER

O God, we come to this worship with honesty, knowing that you understand us; with humility, knowing that you will lift us up; and with hope, knowing that you fill us with what we need to be your faithful followers, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

HYMN #770 "I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table"

1. I'm gonna eat at the welcome table; I'm gonna eat at the welcome table, Alleluia.
I'm gonna eat at the welcome table; I'm gonna eat at the welcome table, Alleluia.
2. I'm gonna join with sisters, brothers; I'm gonna join with sisters, brothers, Alleluia.
I'm gonna join with sisters, brothers; I'm gonna join with sisters, brothers, Alleluia.
3. Here all the world will find a welcome; here all the world will find a welcome, Alleluia
Here all the world will find a welcome; here all the world will find a welcome, Alleluia.

CALL TO CONFESSION

Our God is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is close to all who call on Him in truth, listening to their cries for help, and offering them salvation. So let's bring our confession to God, knowing that he will hear our prayers and forgive.

PRAYER OF BROKENESS AND CONFESSION

You would call us to your feast, Inviting God, but our busy lives keep us from responding. You remember every word we utter, every prayer we whisper, but we forget all the little ways you care for us. You would make your gentleness known through us, but we lash out in anger and fear towards others. Forgive us, God of all hope, and remember your Servant, Jesus Christ. In him, we can live in your way. Through him, we can learn the dreams you have for us. With him, we can open our arms and embrace all the people we meet.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND FORGIVENESS

No one knows us better than God does. No one understands us more than God does. No one accepts us as God accepts us. Believe the good news of the gospel and say with me: Jesus died for me. **Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me.**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Isaiah 25:1-9

¹ O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. ² For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. ³ Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. ⁴ For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, ⁵ the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.

⁶ On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON Matthew 22:1-14

¹ Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ 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." ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

SERMON "Wearing Your Faith"

Early last fall I had lunch with a good friend. He told me about returning to his hometown in Alabama to attend a cousin's wedding. This cousin, the bride, was one of those family relations that you never quite know what to expect. There was definite curiosity about the kind of character this girl would find to marry her. It became clear, he said, at the rehearsal dinner. I was told that in the south, and more specifically, in the Southern Baptist tradition, the rehearsal dinner comes first, then the wedding rehearsal. Anything church was a formal affair. The high and grand occasion of a wedding, any part of the wedding, was seen as a time for the women to don their "good" dress and men to slip into tie and jacket. Dinner had just started when, much to the horror of everyone present, the best man – the groom's brother – strutted into the room wearing an old worn t-shirt, torn blue jeans, and worst yet, a big wad of snuff stuck right between his lower lip and bottom teeth! My friend's daughter leaned over to her father and asked, "Who is that?" My friend's response – "that is what your cousin is getting herself into, several steps before the missing link!"

Appearance matters. Whether we like it or not, what we wear reflects much of who we are as well as our attitude. This certainly was the case in today's parable. I had to read this parable a couple of times to get at the point Jesus was trying to make. It is in two sections. Jesus told of a wedding banquet. Not just any banquet, but the wedding banquet for the marriage of the king's son. It was to be on the grandest of scales. No expense would have been spared. In accordance with Jewish custom, the time of the wedding celebration was not included in the invitation. Only when everything was ready (remember, no refrigeration), would the invitation be sent to the guests. Those invited? The normal A-list people, the social elite, the ones with whom you would expect a king to rub elbows. But these respectable people had other plans and so they passed. A second invitation was sent, this time it included the particulars of the menu, but once again the "Beautiful People" turned away due to "other plans." Their lives were filled with things—good things like farming and real estate and car pools and vacations and social commitments. They were BUSY!

Matthew doesn't spend so much time on the excuses as does Luke who tells the same parable with variation. Luke itemizes the excuses.

While I was in seminary I helped to run a mid-week after school program. It began with the children sitting in a circle singing songs. The Wedding Banquet song was always requested. I am quite certain it was due to the fact that they made up their own version of the excuses – "I cannot come to the banquet don't trouble me now, I have *bought* me a *wife*, I have *married* a *cow*!" This never failed to break up the group, each and every week. It never got old.

I am reminded of a Hasidic story, which I think our children can understand because it is about that age-old game of hide-and-seek. The story goes that a little boy playing the game with his friends. For some unknown reason they stopped playing while he was hiding. He began to cry. His old grandfather came out of the house to see what was troubling the boy and to comfort him. After learning what had happened, the grandfather said, "Do not weep, my child, because the boys did not come to find you. Perhaps you can learn a lesson from this disappointment. All of life is like a game between God and us. Only it is God who is weeping, for we are not playing the game fairly. God is waiting to be found, but many have gone in search of other things."

Matthew's version describes the reaction of the invited guests as violent. Some go so far as to kill the messengers. Remember, this parable follows on the heels of last week's lesson about the violent tenants who killed servants and the landowner's son. Remember also that it was told just days before the most violent of events would occur – the crucifixion of Jesus.

As a result of the rejections, king sends the invitation to the least likely. Like a farmer slinging seeds in every direction instead of putting them in prepared ground, the servants broadcast the appeal for guests every whichaway. Those, who never in their wildest dreams would have expected an invitation to a royal wedding feast, now, not only hear, but also respond, yes! These are the sick, the diseased, the tax collector and prostitute outcasts, the uneducated, the little people – without a checkbook or a voter's registration card or social security number, even you and me, and they come.

Years ago I attended a conference where the keynote speaker, Leonard Sweet, started every session with "good morning, saints." All attendees responded "good morning." This was then followed by the Sweet saying, "good morning, sinners." Again, all responded, "good morning," but this time the response was much louder with gusto. I think that even though our reformed theology would tell us that we are saints – baptized in the faith, which is the definition of a "saint," we are also, sinners still in need of our savior. For most of us at this conference, sadly, we identified more with the "sinner" title. Speaking for myself, I identified with the "sinners" who finally came to the banquet – unworthy, yet welcome. I think the 1,200 other church workers felt the same. We may never dine with presidents or princes, or sit at a table like the ones portrayed in the once popular *Downton Abbey*, yet still, we are invited to God's table. And, there truly is no finer table to be found.

What a wonderful story, this parable. We can all sit back and relax, because God loves and welcomes all of us, saints and sinners, flaws and all, unworthy and unlovable by human standards. For anyone who is hungry, there is a seat at the banquet table, even for you and for me. That's where Luke leaves this parable, but not Matthew. No, Matthew goes on. The guests arrive. And, like Luke, the gala includes a hodgepodge of people from nursing homes and soup kitchens and sanitariums and even the odd one out from school who gets picked last every time except when that individual is the object of getting *picked on*. Not to be left out is also the rather ordinary, trying hard to make it, average "Joe" and "Plain Jane"—all eating cold shrimp, prime rib and swilling down chilled champagne or sparkling cider all to the sweet sounds of Beyonce and Frank Sinatra.

The festival of all festivals unfolds like a dinner napkin before the meal. But then, to our horror, rattling every bone in "inclusion's" body, the host appears and confronts a guest who is without the appropriate attire. He wore his old t-shirt and jeans with a big old wad of snuff in his mouth and then came on in to the most spectacular of events ever. How dare he? Unable to justify such a faux pas, (he is speechless when questioned about his attire), the king has his servants toss the obtuse fellow – not merely out on the street—but into "outer darkness." So much for the Gospel invitation to "come as you are." And those great hymns—"Just As I Am," or "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms"—can we believe them now? What about Ephesians 2:8, where we read: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast"? Is grace really, deep down, not grace at all? Or was Matthew, or Matthew's Jesus, simply having a bad hair day?

Let's understand this better. First, we need to understand that it isn't because this individual couldn't afford a wedding garment that he came so inappropriately dressed. According to the custom at the time, when a ruler held a wedding banquet, proper procedure required that the host provide appropriate wedding garments for all the guests as a matter of etiquette and hospitality. So it wasn't a lack of resources that led to the guest's attire but it was the guest's failure to accept the king's hospitality, the guest's unwillingness to participate fully in the wedding feast that gets him trouble.

Next, let's look at his response when questioned about his attire. He had nothing to say. There are no excuses and he doesn't even care enough to try to offer one. Perhaps he thought the rules didn't apply to him. Maybe he thought it was perfectly all right for him to do his own thing. But Christianity is not only a belief it is also a lifestyle. What I mean by that is that belief will get us in the door, but then we are called to take up our cross – to live our faith. This parable asks us to examine our lives to see if we are properly dressed. Have we "put on" or adopted the right garments? What do those look like? Just like the trite but appropriate, "What would Jesus do" like a generous spirit, a dependence upon and trust in God, a love of neighbor – all our neighbors, and a life of obedience to Christ's teachings of caring and compassion. Being appropriately dressed means wearing a life on the outside where they would know that we are Christians by our love, walking side by side spreading God's love, working with each other, guarding each one's dignity and saving each one's pride, and praising God from whom all things come rather than holding tightly to what we think is exclusively ours while thinking more of ourselves than we really do of God.

There was a story that appeared in the magazine Today's Christian Women. A woman took her four-year-old granddaughter to the doctor's office with a fever. The doctor, trying to put the child at ease, looked into her ears and said, "Who's in there? Donald Duck?" She giggled and said, "no." He looked in her nose and said, "Who's in there? Mickey Mouse?" Again she laughed and said, "no." He put his stethoscope on her heart and said, "Who's in there? Barney?" She replied, "No, Jesus is in my heart. Barney is on my underwear."

Unless we come as a child we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. If Jesus is in our hearts, our lives will be clothed inside and outside with the proper apparel that Jesus taught is faith, hope, love, forgiveness, tolerance, mercy, kindness, compassion and joy. It isn't enough to just come to the banquet. We have all received the invitation and are here. They say "clothes makes a person." There are those who claim to be a Christian but are acting in ways that, well, I don't know what gospel they are reading but it sure isn't the one I've read. The Jesus they claim isn't the Jesus of love and kindness for ALL. The clothes that we choose to wear often reflect

our status, our values, and even our priorities. John Wesley said, “Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the sky.” Question is, would you be conspicuous or just blend in? What do your clothes reflect?

PRAYER

God, we come into Your presence
with praise and thanksgiving for Your faithful love.
Your love never fails—not even we turn away from You:
when we ignore Your invitation,
or desert You for gods of our own making.
Even then You do not abandon us,
but reach out—again and again—
inviting us back into relationship once more.

As You welcome us, so You welcome our prayers.
We bring them to You with confidence,
knowing that You will hear and answer.

We pray for the world You created, and the people who share it with us:
- for countries caught up in war or violent conflict,
- for regions of the world struggling with increased cases of COVID-19,
- for those whose homes and lives are threatened by natural disaster;

For these and all the other areas in our world
where there is need and despair,

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our country and for its people:
- for our government leaders, federal and local,
- for our judicial system, police forces and military,
- for our cities, towns, and rural communities,
- for employers and employees, for young and old,

For all who are part of this great country,
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our local community—the people of this city/town,
- for those who are unemployed,
- for those in prison,
- for those who are hungry,
- for those who are alone and afraid,

For all our neighbors, both known and unknown to us,
Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for this congregation—our brothers and sisters in Christ,
- for those who are ill or whose loved ones are ill,
- for those who are anxious about the future,
- for those struggling with their faith,
- for those who minister among us,

For all your people in this place,
Lord, hear our prayer.

Pour out your Spirit on us!
Fix our hearts and minds on what is true and honorable and right.

Give us the joy and peace that comes from knowing and doing your will.
Keep us faithful to the call we have received in Christ Jesus, our Lord,
 extending Your loving invitation to the world around us.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN #729 "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian"

1. Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart; Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart, Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

2. Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart; Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart, Lord I want to be more loving in my heart.

3. Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart, in my heart; Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart, Lord I want to be more holy in my heart.

4. Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart; Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart, Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.

BENEDICTION

Accept God's invitation to you, welcoming you just as you are. Know that you are called to follow Jesus and to live out your faith in the unique context of your life. Trust that the Holy Spirit is with you, encouraging you every step of the way. May the peace of the Lord be with you always. Amen.