

In the Gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus says “The kingdom of heaven is like a King, a Man, who arranges a marriage and throws a great feast for His Son.” The kingdom of heaven is like a King who is generous, but whose patience knows limits. He grows angry at those who disrespect Him. He enacts vengeance and destroys cities. He throws out those who would come to the feast but not actually participate, those who do not receive with thanks and praise, those who will not wear the appropriate garment. They are cast into the dark place of eternal torture, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The point of the parable that Jesus taught is that, not everyone goes to heaven. Jesus dies on the cross and rises again from the grave for all people. Jesus wants all people to be in heaven. But not everyone will go to heaven. Too many simply reject the King's invitation to the wedding banquet out of hand. They can't be bothered. They have to go off to their fields or their business, or they are angry and malicious and kill the servants for even asking them to come.

They, in turn, are killed and their cities are destroyed. Certainly, this is fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And maybe we could even say that the parable is fulfilled again in the bombing of Pearl Harbor? What about the World Trade Center? And maybe even the Federal Building in Oklahoma City? Yes. God used Pharaoh. God used Alexander the Great. God used Herod, Pilate, and Caesar. God even uses evil men like Adolf and Saddam and Osama to fulfill His purpose, to carry out His wrath and bring about repentance.

This is a warning. This parable is not some mission appeal that you would work harder to win the lost, as though all that you have to do to get people to believe is just work harder at it, preach better, or pray harder. The truth is, God doesn't need our help. It is His Kingdom. He'll take care of it. He doesn't need us but He wants us. He wants to use us to extend His kingdom. He wants to send us, His servants out, to call in those who are invited saying, “All things are ready. Come to the wedding.” It is not our fault that most people reject God and it should not surprise us that they do. Everyone has been restored to a loving relationship to the Father in the death of the Son, but not everyone will accept it. Unfortunately, most refuse the invitation. They do not want it. This parable is a warning for all Christians. This parable is saying more than “Not everyone goes to heaven”. It is saying, “Not everyone who comes to Church or who calls themselves Christian goes to heaven.”

Some seem to come in, but they don't really come in. They want the power and the glory of Christianity and being called a Christian, but they do not want the cross and the humility and the suffering and the shame that goes along with being a Christian. Or they want to see some miracle, but they do not believe in miracles. They are curious, but not too curious; they don't want to get too close. Or they speak out of both sides of their mouths, calling Jesus teacher on the one hand while insisting on their own way and understanding on the other. Whatever they are: they aren't Christians. They come to the wedding hall but they will not be clothed by Christ. They insist on their own garments. They insist on their own reason and strength.

The parable is a warning to us. We can come to church as a self-righteous, self-satisfied hypocrite. We can fool the world but we can't fool God. The only way we come into the Kingdom is if we get rid of our own self-righteousness and are clothed with Christ's righteousness. We need to clothe ourselves with Jesus' holiness. We need to deny ourselves and all our filthy rags. We need to cover ourselves in Jesus' good works, His righteousness, His

holiness. We need to deny ourselves and pick up the cross and follow in the Way, the Truth and the Life that is Jesus.

Putting on Christ, as we do in the life giving waters of Holy Baptism, is like having lice. We have to take our clothes of sin off and burn them. We have to throw out the sheets of our old Adam and burn them. We have to thoroughly scrub down every inch of our home and cleanse it. We have to get sprayed down, we are segregated from everybody else, we go to great pains to get rid of the parasite; that no longer are we children of sin death and the devil, but of God, heirs of heaven. But the surprise is that the initial humiliation is only for a little while and the delousing is virtually painless. But ultimately we find ourselves not in the hands of a prison guard but of a gentle and loving Savior, who clothes us with His own garments, who calls us and makes us lovely; we are recreated and restored to perfection, goodness and holiness, the image of God.

And even though we don't want to think of God in this way, there are some things in this parable worth thinking on. In the parable, there is both a call to repentance and also a promise of God's steadfast mercy toward us, a love which has no end. The servants are sent out to gather and invite everyone they found. Even to the point of death we are to preach and to teach and encourage all people to come. We are to make no distinction, everyone is invited. This is good news for us sinners. It doesn't matter if we are covered with lice or how infected we are, how contagious we are. We are all gathered in. And everyone is clothed with the wedding garment and eats of the same rich food at the feast. We are all dressed in the robe of righteousness, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. We are all fed the body and blood of Jesus. We all eat the Bread of Life and drink from the cup of salvation.

That is the comfort of the Gospel and this parable concerning the Kingdom of heaven: God does all the work, provides all the grace, and receives all the guests. We haven't been good enough and we can't. We don't deserve to be in God's presence, to eat His Body and drink His Blood, but He wants us to have it. He provides it for us from His own generosity. He holds nothing against us. He wants us to be where He is and be blessed. And that is why we are here in this sanctuary, in the presence of God, in this banquet hall this morning.

We seized and killed His Son. In our sin, we put Jesus to death on the cross on Good Friday. But our heavenly Father welcomes us into His presence, into His kingdom, as His Sons. In Baptism our heavenly Father, our King, has adopted us and made us His own, heirs of His kingdom. We neglect God. We reject God. We deny God. We sin against God and our neighbor. But even though that is the case, the truth is, God our heavenly Father remains steadfast in His mercy toward us. His great love toward us never diminishes. He is always willing and eager to speak kind and saving words to us. God speaks us clean, He declares us righteous and holy and good; He recreates us in His image. By His words we are forgiven.

"Vengeance is mine," says the Lord, "I am the burner of cities, the destroyer of Sodom and Jerusalem. But I choose to be merciful. I choose to pardon and to reconcile and to bring peace. I choose to be generous and merciful, to raise the dead and give eternal life and salvation to all who believe and are baptized." That is the God we have. He has chosen us. He has made us His own. We are merely the recipients of His goodness and mercy. We are recipients of heaven for no other reason than this, He is the King of love. That is the promise of the parable. Thanks be to God. In ✠ Jesus' name. Amen.