

Worship Center? Or Divine Service of Grace?
“So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’” [Matthew 22.12; NKJV]

In the Holy Gospel for this Sunday, which you have already had read to you, Jesus tells the famous parable of the wedding feast. In this parable, Jesus introduces those who were invited to the feast, but who had other things more important, in their way of thinking, than to attend the feast. So, in His parable, Christ says, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore, go out into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding. So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both good and bad. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

I.

Notice what qualifies these guests to be gathered together in the wedding hall: Nothing but the invitation. These people who fill the hall are simply going about their own business, traveling the highway of life. Prior to being brought to the

wedding hall, they did not know the king. They did not know his son. None of them woke up that morning with the intention of attending a wedding feast. Then came the invitation, delivered by a total stranger, interrupting their plans for the day. And it was the invitation itself that carried the power to draw them into the hall.

Notice also that those who were found were, in Jesus’ own words, “both bad and good.” They did not need to be pre-qualified to receive the invitation. That they were alive and on life’s road were qualifications enough. Thus, Christ’s church is for sinners, both the sinners whose sins we consider tolerable, and also for the sinners whose sins we consider intolerable. Jesus shows that the Gospel is intended for everyone!

This is Christ’s picture of His church, which is His New Testament Israel, His New Testament children of God. Bloodlines tracing back to Abraham do not make you a member of Christ’s church. Rather, faith alone, kindled by the

Gospel, makes you a member of Christ's church.

So, your place in this parable is among those who were invited, without merit or worthiness on their part, to be in the wedding hall for the feast. Christ shows you how the fact that you are a Christian today is not a matter of the kind of life you live, or the kind of things you do, but rather it is a matter of the grace of God the Father, the merit and worthiness of God the Son, and the effective calling and working of God the Holy Spirit. To trust that the promise is for you, to hear again the forgiveness of all your sins, and to rejoice in the fellowship of saints and angels, is the gift of God to you. This gift promises you that you have this day the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and communion of the Holy Spirit.

II.

Thus, Jesus presents to you two kinds of reactions to the invitation to receive God's grace. The first reaction in the parable was the reaction of rejecting

what Christ intends us to receive. In the parable, this is pictured by those who have other things to do than to attend the banquet. But, in Jesus' application, it becomes clear that those who reject the invitation reject the intention of God in His Word and promises! Those found present are those who receive and rejoice in what God wishes to give in His banquet. Today, this distinction can be seen in the patterns found among Christians, even – sad to say – among Lutherans, when it comes to the times when God gathers together His chosen and invited people.

For many, the expectation of what should happen on Sundays is that Church life should be what today is popularly called, "The Worship Center." And it is characterized by what will cause the audience to be put on fire for Jesus. The Worship Center is the place of teaching, motivating, focusing the faithful on their faith. The thought behind this plan is that, once you are forgiven, then you have to be put to work.

Historically, in particularly in the Lutheran Church, the faithful are drawn not to a Worship Center, but rather to a Divine Service of Grace. The focus here is not on raising feelings and notions of commitment, but rather the focus is on the gift of grace, the forgiveness of sins. The point of such gatherings is to call the good and bad, the strong and the weak, the young and the old, to receive the forgiveness of sins for faith and for life. And that is precisely what Jesus pictures in this parable of the wedding invitation. It is grace and the forgiveness of sins that is the point and the purpose of gatherings that we call Church. Church is for feeding on God's grace, as Jesus shows in His parable.

III.

But there is one very important part of the parable that we have yet to consider. It is this matter of the wedding garment. In Jesus' parable, the king comes into the crowded wedding hall, and spots a

man there who does not have on a wedding garment. Now, clearly, since all these guests were heading anywhere but to a wedding feast that day, none of them came dressed for the occasion. Here, you need to understand the custom of that day. When men of wealth or of high rank hosted a wedding feast, they provided racks of wedding garments at the door, for each guest to put on. This practice not only made everyone equal, both the rich and the poor, but it also covered the individuality of the guest with the uniform of the host, for they were not there to put on a show of their own tastes and personalities, but rather for honoring the host and the newly wedded couple.

So, here we have a man who refuses the wedding garment. He is going to attend this feast on his own terms, showing off his own individualism. He is not in the hall for long. The king declares, "Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of

teeth.” The phrase “the outer darkness” is a Scriptural description of eternal punishment, which is also called “hell.”

With this statement, Jesus is switching from story-telling to application. The wedding garment is that which alone keeps you from hell: It is the righteousness of Christ that He bestows upon you in the Gospel. The Gospel call goes out to anyone, no questions asked, no qualifications necessary. Where the Gospel is believed, the garment of righteousness has been bestowed. Where the Gospel is ignored, the wedding garment is being rejected.

People may attend a church for a variety of reasons, but only one counts with God: to wear the righteousness of Christ by faith in the Gospel. Just as this man does not join the wedding feast without the wedding garment, so church-goers do not join the fellowship of the children of God without wearing the garment of Christ’s righteousness as

their only status, purpose, and goal before the throne of God.

The glorious thing about the wedding feast is that everyone is dressed alike, in the wedding garment provided by the host. The glorious thing about the church is that the same thing is true, and this is Christ’s point of application for you! Everyone in Christ’s church, everyone who is gathered by the Holy Spirit today around Christ’s Word and Sacrament, is fed alike, with the food of the forgiveness of sins, and everyone brought by the Spirit to the Word and Sacrament is dressed alike, dressed just as you are today, dressed in the righteousness of Christ. So, in order that you not fall into the tragedy of the missing garment, or the tragedy of the mistaken understanding of the services of God’s House, Christ today shows you in His Word the vision of the wedding banquet and the wedding garment, to feed you with forgiveness and to cover you with of His own righteousness!