

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost; October 22, 2023
+ Matthew 22:1-14 +
“Decliners and Recliners”

Jesus spoke to them again in parables. He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who prepared a wedding banquet for this son. He sent out his servants to summon those who were invited to the wedding banquet, but they did not want to come.

“Then he sent out other servants and said, ‘Tell those who are invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fattened calf have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!’

“But those who were invited paid no attention and went off, one to his own farm, another to his business. The rest seized the king’s servants, mistreated them, and killed them. As a result, the king was very angry. He sent his army and killed those murderers and burned their town.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. So go to the main crossroads and invite as many as you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those servants went out to the roads and gathered together everyone they found, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wearing wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the servants, ‘Tie his hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Do you ever get an invitation to an event – a party, a wedding – and they ask you to RSVP? So, you check your calendar, and see you have a scheduling conflict. So now you have to decline. There’s something more important going on that day – you’ve got to work overtime, or there’s a family function – something that’s simply a higher priority than going to that party.

But now say you've gotten an invitation to a party, and it's from someone who you know throws the best parties known to humankind. Fun guests. The best food. Top-notch wine. And no threat of getting pulled into Pictionary or Charades. So, you check your calendar and see nothing. Or maybe you see something – or even some things – but this invitation just outweighs them. You'll move those other things around, or skip them, just to make this party. And you go and are glad you did. The party was even better than you imagined.

Today’s Gospel is about the best invitation you will ever receive. It’s to a real feast. Unique, literally: one-of-a-kind. Nothing could be better or more important than a seat at this banquet.

The Gospel today is from Matthew chapter 22, where we quickly set this scene. Jesus is in the temple of Jerusalem during Holy Week. His opponents are still trying to trap and discredit him. They’re conspiring to kill him, too. The hard-hearted religious leaders have had enough of him. They hate Jesus passionately.

How they must really hate Jesus’ ability to read their minds and hearts! He knows what they’re thinking and tells them that because they have rejected the Messiah, God has rejected them and is pronouncing judgment on them, and that God will find others to take their place, those God chooses to believe in Jesus. And Jesus does it with the parable of the Wedding Feast for the King’s Son.

Jesus begins: **“The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out his servants to summon those who were invited to the wedding banquet, but they did not want to come.”** A new Christian was very bothered by the fact that Jesus’ own nation mostly rejected him. How could they? What were they thinking? And it makes no sense for those who got to see all miracles and hear the teaching firsthand to turn away from Jesus! We could go into a long explanation for the political and social reasons these leaders had for rejecting Jesus. But ultimately it comes down to Jesus’ very simple and sad explanation: they did not want to come.

But now look what the king does. **“Then he sent out other servants and said, ‘Tell those who are invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fattened calf have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!’”** The king displays amazing love and patience. Those who have rejected the invitation get another call. Is that what you and I do when someone sends back an RSVP with regrets? Do we send them another one? What if they write a nasty note on it? “I wouldn’t come to your party if it was the last party on the face of the earth!” Would you send them another invitation then? But God the King does. And the second invitation goes into even more detail about how snazzy the banquet will be and pleads: everything is ready. Come on!

But the invitation is declined again. Some coldly walk away to things they think are more important. Others get violent and make sure there will be no third invitation: **“But those who were invited paid no attention and went off, one to his own farm, another to his business. The rest seized the king’s servants, mistreated them, and killed them.”**

Finally, the King’s patience runs out. God has infinite mercy and love for those who believe, but he never even claims to have infinite patience for those who do not: **“As a result, the king was very angry. He sent his army and killed those murderers and burned their town.”** This happened quite literally about forty years later when God poured out his wrath on Jerusalem by allowing the Roman army to come and burn their city to the ground.

But this is the destiny of all those who decline God’s invitation. What happened to the decliners in Jerusalem is only a microcosm of the final judgment coming to all unbelievers in the whole world. It will be bad. Those who have heard the invitation and rejected it will get hell. The warning for us is clear: when the invitation comes to you, when the messengers of God call you to repent of your sins and believe in Jesus, do not decline. God’s patience is finite.

This is a message for our time. How many people in our community are declining the invitation? And not just in our community, but how many who have their names listed on the membership list of a Christian congregation? They may reject it violently and openly, or quietly. But they decline. We need to listen to this warning, too. This is the place for us to hear God’s invitation to heaven through faith in his Son, and to take it to heart. This is where God meets his people with his grace in Word and Sacrament, to give and grow faith in Jesus. It is most unwise to think other things are more important and urgent.

After a while, you hear the same silly so many times it gets hard to hear them anymore: Oh, God is on the golf course, too, on Sunday morning. I can be just as close to him there. God wants me to be healthy, so I need my sleep on Sunday. I don’t need to go every week. But I feel closer to God in my garden than I do in church. Besides, traffic! God extends the invitation to heaven through the good news of his Son. That comes in the Word and the sacraments. With that gospel he also gives and grows the faith that accepts the invitation. We need to be where the Word and sacraments are. Yes, God is on the golf course. But

unless you're reading the Bible while you're swinging that driver, he's not growing your faith. Yes, God is in your garden. But he doesn't work faith through peas and carrots. He works it through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. And yes, you do need to come every week. Your faith is under attack by your world, by the Devil, and the sinful nature inside of you. You need God to strengthen it.

But what about those in the pew every chance they have? Are there ways for us to decline, even while we sit here? Oh yes. But not taking the message to heart. But letting in slide in one ear and right on out the other. The story of the decliners is a warning to everyone: both those who reject Christ, and those who believe but do not take God's gracious invitation – which he extends in Word in sacrament – perfectly to heart.

Jesus continues. And thank God he does! After the previously invited guests decline the call, the king remains determined that there will be a full banquet hall for his son's celebration. **"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. So go to the main crossroads and invite as many as you find to the wedding banquet.'** Those servants went out to the roads and gathered together everyone they found, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests." This is good news. The gospel in Word and sacrament will succeed. The good news of Jesus' salvation will have its way, and there will be those who respond with faith. The wedding hall will be full of guests. These are the recliners. No, they're not La-Z-Boys – don't be silly! The term translated as "guests," is literally "reclining ones."

At a sumptuous feast in those days, the guests reclined on dining couches around a table spread with wonderful dishes. That's what you did at a wonderful feast: recline, relax, be served, and enjoy. And that is exactly what we'll do at the heavenly wedding banquet that God will have for his Son when Jesus returns. You and I will recline at the marriage feast of the Lamb, in his kingdom that will have no end. But it gets better: we will be both the honored guests and his bride, spotless and holy, washed clean in his blood, clothed in his holiness.

Thank God! He has used the good news of Jesus' purifying blood and robe of righteousness to work faith in us, faith that replies "Yes, please!" to the invitation to heaven. We were washed clean and dressed in Jesus' holiness in baptism, and God keeps us in faith still with the good news in his Word and Communion. We are joined to Jesus' death and resurrection and will share in his resurrection when he comes again.

But without that righteousness, no one can get it. That's the point Jesus makes at the end of the parable: **"But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wearing wedding clothes?'** The man was speechless. Then the king told the servants, **'Tie him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'** For many are called, but few are chosen." To some celebrations you can wear whatever you want. Others are dress-code specific, including the heavenly banquet. You must be clothed in Christ's righteousness by faith. It's the only way to get in. There are decliners and recliners, but no sneaker-inners. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There is no other name under heaven by which we are saved. Anyone who tries to get in any other way will not be welcome. And God is not fooled. He knows what's in the heart of every person.

So thank God that he has made us his people, clothing us in the robe of Christ's righteousness. In Christ, you have the perfectly holy robe of righteousness that must be worn in the presence of the holy Triune God. The wedding feast for the King's Son will be the best. When Isaiah looked ahead to it, he saw: **a feast**

of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, where God **will swallow up death forever** and **wipe every tear from their faces.** You are invited. God has given you faith and you are dressed in the wedding clothes of Christ's righteousness. Remain in his gospel. **"Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!"** Amen.