

Sermon – Matthew 22:1-14; Isaiah 25:1-9

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### “The Party Won’t Stop”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Preparing for a wedding is no small job, as Erika and I learned fourteen years ago. We spent hours planning the ceremony itself, eventually deciding that the more music by Edvard Grieg, the better. Beyond the wedding was the reception. We had to find a venue, hire a DJ, choose the menu, and on and on. Mistakes were made along the way, like when we created an RSVP card without a place for people to write their names, and so ended up with a lot of meal selections untethered to particular people. We also had to make a guest list. Since we both like quite a few people, we invited pretty much everyone. As the number ballooned past 300, I asked Erika if we really had to invite all of her distant relatives. She assured me that while we should invite them, they wouldn’t actually come. They came. They all came. Still, inevitably, there were a handful of people who couldn’t, or wouldn’t, come to our wedding. No particular day works for everyone, after all. I don’t recall any conversation about what to do about the people who couldn’t come. It may have been disappointing, but every plate of chicken or steak we didn’t have to buy helped us out. At any rate, of one thing I’m sure: At no point did we consider asking the army to go and kill the people who didn’t come to our wedding.
2. The violence in today’s parable is striking; so much so that it threatens to distract us from what’s really going on. Better to deal with it up front than pretend it’s not there. The kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet. All

the best people have been invited, but it turns out they're not interested. So much so that when the king's servants arrived in town to remind them to come, the invited guests put the servants to death. The king, enraged, sends his troops to level the town. Then, insisting upon having a party anyway, he just goes and invites everyone – the good and the bad, the tax collectors and the prostitutes and that one second cousin he's never had much use for. These come to the party, but one gets in without a wedding robe. The king won't have it and sends him off to weep and gnash his teeth. The many killed in retribution, the one sent away to punishment. How is this like the kingdom of heaven?

3. First, let's remember what the goal of the king is, what the parable is telling us God's kingdom is like. God has not set up an obstacle course of righteousness so that people can earn an invitation. God is not keeping a list and checking it twice. God is not the great scorekeeper in the sky. God is not the deity that puritans imagine. *God wants to throw a party.* That's all! God's whole purpose in creating us and this whole world is to be in relationship with us. When the project goes bad, with God's chosen people Israel on the brink of destruction, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah: "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." And, just to make sure no one misses out, God will swallow up death forever. "Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation," which is the prophet's way of saying that it's time for the party to start.
4. To be clear, the parable's use of violence is striking but it is indicative of what happens when our sin is met with God's gracious, merciful, and wide-open invitation. It is not, finally, that horrible sinners and social outcasts will be denied entrance. The only people who won't end up at the party are the ones who insist on not coming. The party is the life of the world, so to stay outside is to insist upon death instead of life. The violence of the parable is the

violence the world brings upon itself; it is not indicative of Gods' desire to destroy or for anyone to be left out. Robert Farrar Capon writes, "For hell, ultimately, is not the place of punishment for sinners; sinners are not punished at all; they go straight to heaven just for saying yes to grace. Hell is simply the nowhere that is the only thing left for those who will not accept their acceptance by grace – who will not believe that at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, free for nothing, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world actually declared he never intended to count sins in the first place."

5. In the end, God will not stop the party just because there are those who'd rather stand around outside in the darkness while everyone else feasts and dances to Kool & the Gang. The marriage date has been set and it will not be derailed. On that Friday, three days after he spoke this parable, Jesus takes the violence of this world's rejection of God unto himself. He succumbs to it and dies. When this world's comes for the Son with violence, he responds not with retribution but with forgiveness. Death won't derail the party of life, and Easter dawns brings the festivities to fever pitch. Death is swallowed up forever! If all of this talk of partying sounds a bit frivolous, well, I think it's supposed to. Is not full-throated joy experienced forever in mutual love between God and God's people the reality for which we yearn? The defeat of death and the forgiveness of sin seem like proper cause for conviviality.
  
6. The divine celebration has begun, but clearly it has not burst fully upon this world. We continue to insist that some people matter while others do not; that some are worthy of invitations while others are not. This parable is a call to us, the church. If we do not answer the invitation, God will find others who will. Let us therefore commit ourselves to the work to which we are called, which is to go and invite others. Evangelism is simply letting others know that the divine feast about to get started and that they're already on the guest list. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, they have all the wedding

garments they'll need. Our opinion of their qualifications is irrelevant. It is God who makes the guest list.

7. God will continue to insist upon broadening the invitation beyond where we think it belongs. I promise you that there won't be a shortage of folding chairs or beverages, so there's no need to be stingy. In this work, we are fed and nourished on our journey by the Shepherd who prepares the feast for us even when enemies nip at our heals, who feeds us with his own body and blood, whose voice continues to speak goodness and mercy even in death's dark vale. As Luther wrote of today's psalm, "By giving His life for us He has obtained for us grace, forgiveness of sin, comfort, help, strength, and eternal life against the devil and all misfortune. To the sheep of Christ this is a dear, sweet voice." With the Shepherd's voice in our ear and the call of God crystal clear, we can live with the joy that sustained St. Paul even in prison, where Paul penned these words: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."
  
8. *We*, not God, have created a world of violence and hatred and death. A world that can look and feel an awful lot like hell. But Jesus has come to undo what we've done. In putting Jesus to death, humanity thought they had denied God's invitation once and for all. Nailing him to a tree really should have done the trick. But the God of grace will insist upon grace, and the death of the bridegroom ushers in the party of the resurrection. You can stay outside and grumble if you'd like, but I think I'll make my way up to the bar, order a club soda, and get to know some of those out-of-town guests. Maybe they don't look like they belong; then again, neither do I, and neither do you. Yet here we are, feasting upon the Lamb of God whose death gives life to the world. Thanks be to the God who insists upon celebrating, who loves you enough to invite you, and who died to make your attendance possible. Christ has died. Christ is risen. The feast is getting started. Church, you've got a job: Go and tell the others. Rejoice! Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.