

“Everything Is Ready; Come to the Wedding Banquet!”
A Sermon for St. John the Baptist’s Episcopal Church, Minneapolis
by The Rev. Craig Lemming
[Sunday, October 15, 2017](#)

In the name of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, who continues to invite all people to the eternal wedding banquet of new life. Amen.

Four years ago, I took one of most academically rigorous courses at Seminary: The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann. I struggled with Bultmann’s theology, but slowly I grew to love that crusty, old German theologian from the University of Marburg, whose impressive jowls and scowl made him look like a grumpy old trout.¹

Bultmann’s theology, by way of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, taught me that **“Jesus’ preaching is a summons to decision,”** and that when we hear the Gospel proclaimed we are **“all challenged to a decision. All must make up [our] minds what [we] really want to set [our] hearts on, whether it is God, or the goods of the world.”**² All too often, we allow worldly idols to distract us from God’s invitation to abundant new life. As we heard in today’s Gospel:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 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.” But they made light

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Bultmann

² Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity In Its Contemporary Setting* (Thames and Hudson: 1983), 90-91.

of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. (Matthew 22:1-6)

Did you hear that? The parable says, the guests “would not come.” They actively rejected the invitation to the wedding banquet and instead “they went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them.” In our own context, we know that the pitfall of Capitalism is Consumerism – the greedy acquisition and accumulation of dead, material things in ever-increasing amounts as the worth-defining life-goal of Western culture.³ We are forced to work compulsively to produce and to consume continuously and in so doing, we turn away from God, we abuse one another, and we abuse Planet Earth. We refuse God’s lavish invitation to the heavenly banquet and choose instead to worship worldly idols of land and money symbolized by the farm and business in today’s parable. Applying the parable’s allegory in our modern context, it is helpful to know that the slaves in the parable are the Prophets who have been calling us to new life for centuries.⁴ Countless prophets have been maltreated and killed when their radical invitations to new and abundant life threatened empire’s idolatrous worship of consumerism. Just as Herod, Rome’s puppet king, killed John the Baptist,⁵ Western Empires succeeded

³ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?*, Bloomsbury Revelations (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5-6.

⁴ <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/CAMatthew.htm#22>

⁵ Mark 6:14-29.

in killing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and Mahatma Gandhi. Nevertheless, we give thanks that today's young prophet Malala Yousafzai survived attempted murder and continues to resist the evils of toxic Patriarchy by inviting women and children into abundant new life.⁶ Indeed, there are countless prophetic voices, like John the Baptist's and Malala's, that continue crying out in the wilderness today; would that the ears of our hearts were attuned to their invitation to God's heavenly banquet.

Yet, even after humankind rejects the invitation to the wedding banquet in favor of worldly idols, God's gracious invitation persists:

“Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” 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. (Matthew 22:9-10)

It is important to understand the historical context of a Jewish wedding banquet in Jesus' day. A wedding banquet was an extravagant affair that involved joyous feasting and celebrations that lasted up to a week. Invited guests would receive a special ceremonial robe as they arrived, provided by their host, freely given as a gift to wear.⁷ Knowing this helps us to interpret the conclusion of today's parable:

⁶ <https://www.malala.org/>

⁷ <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/matthew/22.htm>

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. 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.” For many are called, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:11-14)

God’s invitation to the joyous banquet of eternal life comes with God’s gift of Grace, freely given to all of us, both good and bad. We need only accept God’s lavish invitation and put on the freely given wedding garment of Grace to feast on God’s gift of eternal life. This is why the Apostle Paul admonishes us to put on the garment of Christ in his Epistles to the Romans (Romans 13:14) and Galatians (Galatians 3:27) and in the Epistle to the Colossians we hear, **“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”** (Colossians 3:12). When we reject God’s lavish invitation to the wedding banquet of eternal life, and when we refuse to put on the freely given gift of God’s extravagant Grace, the consequences are dire. We end up being ruled by self-destructive worldly cares: greedily owning, producing, hoarding, and consuming material goods; ruthlessly mistreating and killing each other; and ultimately being thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Many are indeed called, but like Rudolf Bultmann taught me years ago, it is not so much that God does the choosing, but

that the decision to accept God's invitation and to choose to put on the Grace of Christ is entirely ours. Do we desire God's banquet of eternal life? Or do we desire worldly idols? **"The decision [we] must make is a radical one."**⁸

When we accept God's invitation to the banquet of new life and put on Christ's garment of Grace, we experience what Paul Tillich describes in his famous essay, "You Are Accepted." Tillich writes,

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted." *You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*⁹

I rejoice that I have experienced God's Grace in this place. I give thanks that here at St. John's I have been freely accepted and I have freely accepted Christ's Grace

⁸ Bultmann, 90.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, The Scribner Library: Lyceum Editions (New York: C. Scribner, 1948), 161-62.

extended to me. And yet there are many in this place and beyond these sacred walls who are desperate to experience God's Grace. None more so than those who occupy seats of power today, whose vile purposes promote the idolatry of land and money and encourage the maltreatment and murder of countless human lives. As living members of the Body of Christ, we must continue to go forth into the streets to invite all people, good and bad, to God's wedding banquet. We must continue to be witnesses to God's heavenly banquet proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 25:1-9) this morning:

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.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

God will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

Everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet. Put on the Grace of Christ the Bridegroom and feast on eternal life. The decision is entirely ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.