

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

A warm welcome to our confirmation reunion honored classes, today. I mentioned it last week how I enjoy you all coming back to Zion. I enjoy hearing the stories you tell. And as happened last week, you never can tell when one of those stories might also make it into a sermon.

What a great gospel text for today. Didn't you love it? Coming back to Zion, the place where you may have been given rebirth by water and the Spirit, and certainly where you confirmed your baptismal grace, 75, 70, 65, 60, 50, or 25 years ago? And then you hear, "*The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.*" This is the Gospel of the Lord. Or, "*the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*" This is the Gospel of the Lord. Welcome to Zion!

But don't blame me. Those are just the assigned texts. Indeed, every year, as we approach the end of the church year, we take up texts like this one, that deal with the end of all things, with the gathering of the fruit at harvest time in last week's parable, or gathering people to the wedding feast as we have in this week's gospel.

And to be sure, the thought can be a bit frightening. In part, that's because the timing is unknown — we do not know the day or the hour, date setters notwithstanding. You do know that we just passed yet another end of the world date: September 23, 2017? Another foolish prediction come and gone. Nevertheless, Jesus will come again. Therefore, thoughts of the end can be frightening because there is an unpleasant punishment for those called but not chosen.

But the fact is, this text is really about giving you, the Church, "the called out," comfort — the comfort of knowing all that the King has done and still does to ensure you that you will be sitting at the wedding feast of the Son.

Now God often uses the imagery of marriage to speak of His love for the church. The prophet Isaiah (62:5) sings, "*As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.*" As St. Paul talks about marriage, he reminds us that "*This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church*" (Eph. 5:32). The heavenly multitude from Revelation sing, "*Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready*" (Rev. 19:7).

And the Scriptures don't use this language as a metaphor simply for our understanding, comparing the heavenly marriage to our own. No, our own marriages fall woefully short of the perfection of the heavenly marriage. Rather, the Scriptures describe the reality of the heavenly marriage as the exemplar for

what our own marriages should be and reflect—“*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives*” “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...*” (Eph. 5:24-25)—and to make us eager for what will be when the Lord comes again in glory.

It will be a time of rejoicing, for that’s what weddings are. They’re a time of optimism and hope. Even given the rather ominous words at the end of this parable, this parable is filled with hope. It anticipates a time of great rejoicing for God’s elect, for His Church.

Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is about what the King does. The King gives the wedding feast for His Son. The King initiates it. The King invites the guests. He has the feast prepared. It is His doing! He makes for all peoples “*a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.*” He slaughters the bulls and oxen for the feast. The food and drink, He supplies. He does it all. “*Everything is ready,*” He says. “*Come.*”

Second, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is not cheap—it costs the King. As our bulletin insert says: “*Forgiveness Is Free—But Not Cheap.*” Indeed, we know that it cost our God much more than gold or silver. It cost Him the holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death of our Redeemer, the Lamb, His own Son.

But for those invited—it is free! Heed the invitation. “*‘Come,’ say the Spirit and the Bride. ‘Come.’ ... take the water of life without price*” (Rev. 22:17). “*Come,*” says “*the LORD, your Redeemer*” (Is. 54:8). “[*He*] *who has no money, come, buy and eat! ... buy wine and milk without money and without price*” (Is. 55:1). “*Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb*” (Rev. 19:9).

And so we come at the King’s invitation, with nothing in our hands—no money, nothing with which to barter. Indeed, there is nothing we have that is worthy of this feast—not even our heart, which the old rector in Bo Giertz’ *The Hammer of God* describes as nothing but a rusty old tin can that must be rescued from the junk pile. Thus rescued, we poor sinners come in forgiveness to feast at the Lord’s banquet, to “*Eat what is good, and delight ... in rich food*” (Is. 55:2).

But not all the invited come. Not all who hear the Gospel believe it. The invitation went out first to the Jews. Many heard John’s preaching pointing to the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, and many heard Jesus’ own preaching and flocked to Him. But many were offended, “*turned back and no longer walked with him*” (John 6:66). And as we heard last week, the Pharisees were the builders that rejected “*the stone*” upon which the church is built (Matt. 21:42). Invited, they would not come.

The King sent out His servants to invite others — Gentiles — to the banquet. Here, too, the gracious invitation is rejected by many. Excuses are given. The King's servants are mistreated and killed: prophets and apostles. These who refused the invitation were not worthy, not simply because they were bad, that is, sinners, but because they refused the invitation. They receive their just reward: "*the wages of sin is death*" (Rom. 6:23). "*Whoever does not believe is condemned*" (Mark 16:16).

The invitation goes out again, this time to all, to everyone the servants can find along the highways; the good and the bad, that is, those whom we might deem worthy, and also those whom we might call unworthy. We might think of them that way, but the King does not: beggars, tramps, harlots, robbers, thieves, murderers were all gathered into the wedding hall, all they could find. "*Oh, the depth of the riches ... of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*" (Rom. 11:33). That His heavenly wedding hall should be filled with low-life like this: authority-defying, bad-mouthing, neighbor-hating sinners — like us. It bears witness to His love for mankind. He truly does want all people to be saved.

Still, besides the invitation, access to the wedding hall requires proper attire. And again for the King's feast there is nothing we have of our own to wear — nothing worthy of the Son. The wedding garment that is worthy is surely not our own righteousness — even our righteous deeds are nothing but polluted garments.

But the guests are supplied a garment — remember the King does it all. He has "*clothed [you] with the garments of salvation; he has covered [you] with the robe of righteousness*" (Is. 61:10). He did it for you in Holy Baptism. That's what we affirm as we are confirmed. It's not "for as many of you as were confirmed in the Lutheran Church," but "*as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" In baptism, you were clothed with Him and His righteousness, wrapped up in a wedding garment washed and made white by the blood of the Lamb, a garment without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, because your Bridegroom gave Himself up for you, and then cleansed you by "*the washing of water with the word*" (Eph. 5:26). As much as we appreciate the churchly rite of confirmation, and, as I said, I'm glad you're here, it's by God's Sacrament of Baptism that you enter the wedding hall properly attired and are invited to sit at the feast of salvation.

And who was the man cast out? He was the one who apparently refused the garment, who despised the King's good gift, and thought He could enter anyway. But you cannot enter the Wedding hall on your own terms. It's not doing it your way that counts, but God's way, and God's way passes through water.

But you have heard the invitation and you are here. You have come not on your own terms, touting your own righteousness, but on the King's terms, having put on Christ in Holy Baptism and wearing His righteousness as your wedding

garment. You have come to feast on the food that endures to everlasting life, for the King today provides you with a foretaste of that heavenly feast to come. To be sure, He will come one day in glory to take you there, but today He invites you to come here and eat without cost. And since you can't ascend to heaven, He comes to you today with the rich food of His own body and blood in lowly bread and wine to strengthen your faith and embolden your love. So come! The meal is ready. Come, clothed in your wedding garment. Eat and drink this foretaste as you prepare finally to meet the King at His eternal wedding feast.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.