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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 22:1-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. Think about the last wedding you attended. Were you the bride or groom, the parents, or a friend or family member who only had to show up for happy occasion?

My guess is that most of us have experience both with what it's like to prepare for a wedding and what it's like to be a guest. Even if your only role is to write the checks or dress the flower girl, the activity behind-the-scenes of a wedding can be challenging, to put it mildly.

So what images from those weddings you've been involved with pop into your mind when Jesus says the kingdom of heaven might be like a wedding?

In my experience, weddings are times when joy is in tension with disappointment. Laughter comes sometimes between tears of frustration. Criticism is whispered while niceties are spoken, even if politely. And you are lucky if this is all that happens at a wedding.

Over the last few Sundays we have heard three of Jesus' parables and each has opposing elements of hope and fear, grace and judgement, inclusion and exclusion. Let's put these parables into context.

Chapters 21 and 22 of the Gospel according to Matthew cover Jesus' last week of his life. He is in Jerusalem with his disciples and is teaching and preaching to an audience that includes everyday people along with the chief priests and elders of the Jewish church—the ones who, last Sunday, decided that it was time to shut Jesus up permanently.

The first parable Jesus tells is about a father with two sons—one of which does what the father asks him to do and one who does not. Jesus compares the obedient son to the outcasts of society who came to believe in Jesus and the disobedient son to the church leaders who are rejecting him. Jesus emphasized that both belief and behavior would determine one's place in the kingdom of God.

The second parable also includes a father and son. The father owns a vineyard and the tenants who have worked the land beat up and kill the landowner's servants and eventually his son also. The consensus from Jesus' listeners is that the landowner should kill the tenants and find new more trustworthy caretakers. Jesus seems to agree with them, and everyone understands that the church leaders are the tenants in the story. Matthew seals that opinion by saying the chief priests and elders wanted to arrest Jesus.

And then we have today's parable of the wedding banquet. Those who reject the invitation of the king are killed and their city is destroyed. Those who accept are welcomed. And then there's the confusing ending with the guy who shows up with the wrong clothes and is banished into "outer darkness".

I admit that I have tiptoed around these confusing and violent passages the last few Sundays. And now today we have this odd parable in contrast to a song of praise and assurance from Isaiah, a beloved Psalm describing God as a protector, and Paul's call to rejoice always! It is so tempting to read only the parts that are hopeful and comforting and leave out or ignore the parts that are difficult and confusing.

In each of these three parables Jesus tells us that our faith is meant to guide our actions. When God calls us to work in the kingdom, we are to be both willing and active participants. God calls us to be good stewards of the gifts we have been given—our time, talents, and possessions—as well as providing care for the people who enter into our lives.

And God calls us to worship, to celebrate and revel in the joy of this relationship we have with Christ, who has referred to himself as the bridegroom earlier in Matthew's gospel. We are not meant to stand on the sidelines, or use our religion for purposes other than giving glory, thanks, and praise to God. We are meant to show up—in all circumstances—to work in the kingdom, to be in community with others in the kingdom, and to celebrate in the kingdom of God.

And when we fall short, and it is certain we will and we do, Jesus comes to us. Whether we feel like we are in the outer darkness or wherever we have become lost and alone, Jesus comes and invites us to his banquet of love where he offers us himself in the bread and the wine, and fills us with his love and forgiveness.

Remember, in this part of the gospel story this is the last week of Jesus' life. He is headed to the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Jesus is headed to the cross, to the tomb, and as we confess in the Creed, he is preparing to descend to the dead. As people who live on the other side of the cross we also know that he is preparing for his Resurrection and all that that will mean for those who believe and for the life and salvation of the whole world.

There will be times when we do not live up to the life God calls us to live. We will not follow through with the work of the kingdom because of fear or distraction or downright selfishness. There are times when we will hold on to the things of this world as our own rather than as gifts to care for on behalf of God the Giver. And there are times when we won't show up to worship or we come as sideline observers rather than full participants.

These parables are meant to wake us up, to call us to show up with willing hearts and hands. And this morning we are invited to come to the feast of love, prepared for you. We are already clothed with our wedding garments. In Holy Baptism we were clothed with Christ who surrounds us with God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

Come to the banquet Jesus has prepared for you and rejoice in the marriage feast that has no end!

Thanks be to God! Amen