

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23A)

October 12, 2014

Text: Matthew 22:1–14

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

What kind of religion do you think Christianity is? Dark, somber, geared to the really serious minded. So often I get the impression from the larger public that Christianity is a really big drag, a religious kill-joy of the first order. The Church is where you hear all the does and don'ts whereas the world says live it up to fullest. God is that omnipotent despot who delights in squashing all fun and individuality.

One person, not from Burns or Kimball, not a Lutheran or a churchgoer of any sort, once told me about why they don't go to church. They work hard all week along, Saturday is the one day to get things done around the house, and Sunday is the one day to sleep in, relax, watch movies and play games with the family. Who can argue with wanting to have some relaxing, family time? Would we want to rob them of their one day of family intimacy by making them get dressed, load up family and kids in the car, spend the lion share of the morning in worship and Sunday School only to return home feeling a bit tired for all the effort it took?

Today's appointed readings should correct our thinking about the nature and character of God's kingdom. The OT reading describes feasting on the richest foods and the best wine imaginable. Philippians urges us to rejoice in the Lord always. And Jesus tells a parable of a king throwing a wedding feast of the ages highlighted by fattened oxen and the best food. Calories won't be counted at this feast and there's plenty for everyone. Whatever else you want to say about God's kingdom, it's a joyful, happy realm of unending rejoicing.

Then why do we struggle with seeing Church and the things of God as today's Scripture describe them? And I said "we" intentionally for I include myself in this rather severe criticism. Luther teaches us in the Small Catechism, under the 3rd Commandment that "we should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." Have you ever told someone that you go to church because it's a sacred event and you gladly desire to hear and learn God's Word?

Today's service is a tremendous opportunity to repent and embrace all the richness and fullness of joy Jesus wants to give His beloved people. Do we really think that Jesus would go to hell and back only to leave us in the pits of gloom and passive resignation? I say absolutely no way.

The parable of the wedding feast illustrates beautifully and powerfully our Lord's desire to give His people joy and peace and fulfillment that surpasses mere intellectually knowledge. Jesus desires to give you and me joy that penetrates to the depths of our soul; such a consuming joy that saturates every fiber of your being.

Jesus continues His debate with the chief priests and elders of Israel. As you recall, they don't think Jesus has the authority to cleanse the Temple or to preach God's kingdom. And they certainly don't like His message that God loves all people, including the dregs of society, and wants them to live with Him in the joy of His kingdom. How can Jesus so freely and gladly eat with sinners? Disgusting. How can Jesus receive Gentiles, non-Jews, as people of God? Revolting.

To show how far off the chief priests and elders are from knowing God, Jesus tells a parable, a verbal picture using a real-life, down-to-earth situation. God's kingdom is like a wedding. Now that's a joyful occasion. A man and woman pledge themselves to each other in life-long fidelity: for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Marriage and family is the place where the joys and sorrows of life are shared. That's part of the joy in weddings. Two lives are joined together in a mysterious union of body and soul for the purpose of mutual companionship, love, and the procreation of children.

I need to pause here for a moment and make brief comment about the Supreme Court's recent actions. As a result of the Supreme Court's refusal to hear a case involving same-sex unions, 26 states now have legal same-sex marriage with the anticipation that it will soon be 35 states. In the near future, the Church may be the only place in our country that will honor marriage as the natural, conjugal union of one man with one woman. Dear saints, we, the Christian Church, may be the only institution remaining that will uphold the holiness, beauty, and joy of marriage rather than supporting fornication and sexual deviancy. We did not ask for these perilous times but our task is to be faithful to what is true and right and beautiful. Supreme Courts and man-made laws cannot change what God has ordained. With joy and courage, let us remain true to what is true. Let us reach out in compassion to anyone struggling with sexual sins, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. This is the task given to us by our Lord. Come what may, God's Word endures forever.

Back to our parable. The king makes all the preparations for His son's wedding. And it will be a wedding like no other. Everything is prepared.

But then comes the shocking turn of events. Although joy and gladness are awaiting, the invited guests would not come (vs. 3). More royal servants are sent out to encourage the invited guest to come to the royal celebration. Some continued to ignore the invitation, others made excuses such as too much work; tragically, others became so hostile that they mistreated some of the royal messengers, some were killed (vs. 4–6).

The king responds to the rejection with anger. According to vs. 7, the troops are sent in, the murderers are destroyed, and the city is burned. For Jesus' original audience – the scribes and elders of Israel – this parable is both a historical commentary on Israel's past and a prophetic warning of things to come. Jesus is warning the Jewish leaders to heed the Lord's gracious invitation or the consequences will be severe. And sure enough, in 70 AD Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The Jewish leaders never came to the wedding feast of salvation offered by Jesus.

But the king would have a wedding feast for His beloved Son. Joy and happiness will be found in His kingdom. Servants are sent out again. This time they are sent out into every nook and cranny. Bring them all in to my Son's wedding feast. This invitation is for all people. Don't turn anyone away. The joy of my Son's wedding will be shared with everyone.

This is the description of the Church's ministry since the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus to the Father's right hand. Servants are sent out to call all people into the feast. That's us, dear saints of God. This is our time, to call into this celebration all people. Who cares about their past or even their present! Bring them in. God the Father would have them all rejoice in the wedding feast of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In hindsight, maybe I should have told that person concerned about church taking away family time, that church is actually the best, most joyful family time available on this side of eternity!!

I heard one theologian once say that orthodoxy (right praise) and orthopraxy (right practice or activity) are absolutely essential but they need to be generously seasoned with joy. To use our own Missouri Synod lingo...our conservative, confessional

Lutheranism also needs joy and celebration. And why shouldn't we be joyful? I don't mean by this some shallow, vapid giddiness that is so common in much of Christianity. I'm talking about joy inexpressible and filled with glory (II Peter 1:8). This kind of joy is found in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sinners, like you and me, are completely forgiven and saved from a joyless hell. Instead, we are crowned in righteousness, clothed in glory, promised an eternal inheritance, and made participants in God the Trinity's undying life. That's what this service is all about. The Gospel of Jesus gives the kind of joy and peace that can look at death and the devil square in the face and say "You're defeated. My joy and peace are forever secure in Jesus."

We could end now. Say our prayers, feast on the body and blood of Jesus, sing our last hymn and go home rejoicing. In fact, I hope we do those very things. But I must also proclaim a warning as well. Vs. 11–14 also speak to us, Christ's holy Church.

According to the parable, a man came to the wedding feast and refused the wedding garments offered him. You see, not only does God the Father provide the food He provides the best clothing too. Don't even think about clothing off the rack. This is high quality, tailor made clothing. But a man refused the Father's gift. Even in Christ's Church there can be rebellion and stubborn pride which refuses to rejoice in the goodness of the Father.

That one, according to vs. 13, is bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's so easy to take the Father's love and generosity for granted, as common and unremarkable. Beware, dear saints of God. Let not the deceptions of this world or the sloth of your sinful nature create within you a bitter heart of unbelief.

God's Word proclaims that you are invited guests to the wedding feast. You are clothed in the baptismal robes of Christ's righteousness. You feast on the body and blood of Jesus in joyful anticipation of His eternal wedding banquet. People are thirsting for true joy and lasting peace. It's found here, saints of God. "This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoicing in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:9).

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.