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A-Pentecost 20

Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Ephesians 6:10-18, Matthew 22:1-14

**15 October 2023
Salem, Bridgeport**

“YOU Are Invited!”

*On this mountain 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.... [Isaiah 25.6]*

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.... [Psalm 23.5]

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.
He sent his 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.’ [Matthew 22.2-4]*

Three of our four readings mention a banquet –
a banquet that God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, has prepared for us.
The banquet, of course, is a metaphor – so it’s about more than food;
it’s about every good thing that God has prepared for us,
every gift that God offers, every way that God wishes to bless us.

There are the material blessings that we enjoy – our lives and whatever measure of health we enjoy,
food and clothing, shelter and transportation, relative safety and comfort.

There are our family members and friends,
our faith communities and service organizations, and social clubs and gyms.

There’s music and visual arts, dance and drama, literature and sports.

There are the more abstract gifts of love and joy, peace and patience,
faithfulness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

There’s friendship and romantic love.

Every one of those gifts comes from God’s gracious hand.

And those are just the first to come to mind.

We could probably take the entire time of this sermon
and just list everything for which we are grateful.

But as grateful as we are for the gifts, there is something that’s even more important – and that’s the Giver.
Because God is just not the ultimate free vending machine.
God is our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer.

Isaiah writes,

*I will exalt you...for you have done wonderful things, plans, formed of old, faithful and sure....
You have been a refuge to the poor and to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rain storm and a shade from the heat. [Isaiah 25.1, 4]*

And not only has God already done wonderful things in the past, says Isaiah,
but God will continue to do wonderful things in the future:

*God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all people ...
will swallow up death forever. and will wipe away the tears from all faces.” [Isaiah 25.7-8]*

The Psalmist writes,

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul, and guides me along right pathways...
Though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of death he is with me and comforts me.
He anoints my head with oil and my cup runs over. [Psalm 23.1-5]*

All of these things are part of the banquet
and so again they are not just material gifts or even abstract gifts,
but about something that is so much more important –
about a relationship with the living, loving God of all power and might.

This was the point of the parable that Jesus told to the religious authorities –
that the blessing was not in the dinner itself, but in the invitation into a relationship.
He told his parable to the scribes and Pharisees, and because Jesus often railed against them,
we tend to think of them as bad people, but they weren't.

On the contrary, they were good people who worshiped regularly, studied scripture,
and sought to be diligent in keeping God's law.

It was just that, because of their power and privilege and their relative safety and comfort,
they really didn't have a need for God most of the time.

They were perfectly capable of providing their own banquets and enjoying their own parties.

That's why they were like the people in the parable who declined the invitation.
They didn't see any need to go to the King's banquet, when they could simply arrange their own.
They were completely unaware of their own arrogance and pride,
of the fact that they really were dependent upon the king,
and of how declining the invitation was not only horribly disrespectful to the king,
but how it cut them off from all that the king wanted to give them.

And that's where we may be able to find ourselves in the parable.
Because God wants to be more than the vending machine that we go to when we get hungry.
God wants to be more than the dispenser of panaceas to our problems.
God wants to be more than the one who gives us our get out of jail free cards.
God wants us to be more focused on God who gives the gifts than on the gifts God gives.
Of course, all of us find ourselves declining God's invitations to us at times.
Sometimes we choose not to come to worship or Bible study or prayer gathering.
Sometimes we choose not to spend time alone with God in prayer or praise or pondering scripture.

And yet God continues to invite –
to invite us to worship each week,
to invite us to gather together to study his Word each week,
to invite us to gather together to pray together each week,
and to invite us to spend more time on our own,
worshiping and praising and praying and reflecting on God's word each and every day.
That's the invitation in Jesus's parable – an invitation into relationship with the King
who can not only supply all of our needs, but the desires God has placed in our hearts,
and who can not only answer our prayers,
but answer them in ways beyond anything we have asked or even imagined.

Which leaves us with one more part of the parable to look at –
the guy who was thrown out because he didn't have on the proper attire.
What you need to know is that back in the time this parable was told,
the king would have supplied wedding garments
for anyone who might not have had the appropriate clothing to wear.
Think of a country club or high-class restaurant, where there's a dress code for men
that includes a button-down shirt, tie, and sports coat.
If a man shows up without one of those, the maître d'
will bring out of a closet whatever it is that the man needs to be clothed appropriately.
The guy who got thrown out simply chose not to wear the garments that had been supplied.

What that means for us is that when we come into the King's presence,
we need to be properly clothed – not materially, but spiritually.
Paul says we are to “*put on the full armor of God —
that is, to clothe ourselves
in truth and righteousness and peace and faith and the Word of God.*”

If we don't want to be cast out,
we dare not come into God's presence and then lie or tell half-truths –
but to come in committed to speak the truth in love;
we dare not come into God's presence in order to manipulate or intimidate –
but to come in with a righteous intent to listen to God
and to act in ways that uplift and build up the congregation;
we dare not come into God's presence in order to create conflict or dissension –
but to come in committed to discerning God's will
which will eventually and necessarily lead to unity and harmony and peace;
we dare not come into God's presence to spread fear and anxiety –
but to come in with the purpose of strengthening one another's faith and hope
in the God who does impossible things.

Today, God invites each of us into deeper relationship with him.
God invites us to open our minds and hearts and bodies and souls
to the never-ending stream of love God wants to pour into us.
God invites us to follow Jesus, the way to abundant life.
God invites us to let in the power of the Holy Spirit
who transforms us from the inside out.
God invites us to put on love and joy, and peace and patience, and faithfulness,
and kindness, goodness, and gentleness, and self-control.
God invites us to put on truth and righteousness, and the full armor of God.

God invites us to a spiritual banquet
that is beyond any material banquet we can ever even imagine.
God invites us into the world of signs and wonders, and mystery and magic and miracles.
God invites us into an ever-deepening relationship
with the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
with the Alpha & Omega, the Beginning & the End, the Source & the Completion,
with the Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer, and Love-Maker,
with the Way-maker, Miracle-Worker, Promise-Keeper, Light-in-the-Darkness,
with the God above all gods, the Lord above all lords, and the King above all kings.

God invites us to all this and more.
So let's get ready and accept the invitation.
Because you can be sure that it's going to be the absolute best party ever! Amen