

YOU NEED TO BE HERE

Matthew 22:1-14

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

October 11, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 22, verses 1 through 14. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 22, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast."' ⁵ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' ¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹² And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then 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.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a parable about God the Father and his radical generosity. It is about God the Son, Jesus Christ, and his marriage to his bride the Church. And it is about the Holy Spirit and his call to believe the Gospel and enter into that Church. And so it is also a parable about the Church, the Word of God, and our response to that Word of God. And that is what we will focus most of our time on this morning: the Church, the Word of God, and our response to that Word.

For the past couple months I have been watching for a text that teaches something about the Church. It has become increasingly clear to me that we have some problems in our thinking and attitude toward the Church. And this parable teaches some of what I feel a concern to say to you. And I'll give you the rest for no charge. Sometimes when I say, "We have a problem," I clarify that I mean the American Christian Church in general, and not necessarily Trinity, because I don't want you to feel like I'm just pointing a finger at you. But maybe that lets us off the hook too easily. I am pointing a finger at us. We have a problem here at Trinity. Now the rest of the American Church might have the same problem, but I'm not their pastor. I'm you're pastor, and I am called to say this to you.

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We have a problem in our thinking and attitude toward the Church. It might seem like the pandemic is the problem. And the pandemic is *a* problem, but in the Church the pandemic has merely exposed a deeper problem. The pandemic is kind of a convenient problem. What I mean is, we may have deeper and more serious problems, but we find it more convenient to blame them on the pandemic. In the Church our real problem is that we have grown numb or disinterested in the Word of God. Maybe we've always been numb, but we needed an opportunity to act on our numbness.

Now our actions are always connected with our beliefs. Right actions flow out of right beliefs. Wrong actions flow out of wrong beliefs. So if we are acting wrongly, it's usually not enough to say, "Hey! Knock it off! Quit doing the bad thing, and start doing the good thing." We need to address the underlying belief. So theology is always practical. It may not always be apparent how, but theology is always practical. Sometimes we simply learn something, and we don't know how it applies. It might seem trivial, but it's shaping the way we think after the mind of God. And when our thinking is shaped after the mind of God, then our actions begin to follow as well. When we learn a thing, we don't always know how that thing will shape our lives. But when we learn the Word of God and allow the Word of God to shape our thinking, it will, necessarily, work itself out in how we live. Right belief leads to right action.

So let's start with a theological question: *What is the Church?* I want you to think about that. What do you believe the Church is? And I want you to think about it, not because the definition of the Church is up to you. It is not up to you. God's Word defines what the Church is. But I want us to compare what we think the Church is with what God says the Church is. So first, what do you believe the Church is?

Then examine whether or not your answer is the same as your practical belief. This is an important step, because sometimes we have a disconnect within our own minds. Sometimes we can know the textbook answer, but our practical belief ends up being something else. This practical belief is often unconscious. If someone asks you what you believe, you might know the right answer, and you might even think you believe it, but our actions often reveal that our practical belief is something else. We end up living and making decisions based on our practical beliefs, and those practical beliefs can be far different from what God commands us to believe.

And this is true for all areas of Christian doctrine. For example, you may confess that Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." That means he has all authority and dominion, both in heaven and on earth. But when you see evil in the world, you don't pray. Instead, you look only to politicians. Or you may confess "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." But you spend your life accumulating earthly treasures. Or you may confess "the forgiveness of sins." But you attempt to hide your sins, even from God. Sometimes our practical beliefs differ from what we confess, but those practical beliefs are borne out in our actions. This can be true for all areas of Christian doctrine, but for today I want us to examine what we believe about the Church.

I've been rambling a bit to give you an opportunity to think about and answer my initial question: *What is the Church?*

Here's the textbook answer: "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered" (*Augsburg Confession, Article VII, 1*). Your answer might be slightly different, and it might still be right. We'll get to other definitions in a moment. But here's our textbook definition: "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered."

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Now how do we get that answer? The New Testament word for “church” (ἐκκλησία), by its non-technical definition, simply means “an assembly” or “a congregation.” So if we’re talking about the Christian Church, then it’s the assembly or congregation of believers, which we also call “saints.” But it’s not like any assembly of people who just happen to be Christians is the Church. Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (18:20). And what does it mean to gather in Jesus’ name? It means we gather to do the things Christ has commanded us to do. You can’t just get some Christian friends together to go bowling and say, “In Jesus’ name get a strike.” No. A gathering of Christians is the Church when they are gathered for the activities Jesus commanded. That is, to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. That’s what it means to gather in Jesus’ name. So that’s how we get the definition, “The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered.”

So we learn a few things from this definition. First, you can’t be the Church by yourself. There is no gathering of one. God desires us to be together. And second, we can’t just do whatever we want and call ourselves the Church. Being the Church necessarily means that we engage in the activities Jesus instituted.

There are also other ways to define the Church. And these other definitions are not contradictory to the one I already gave you. Rather, they supplement it. Sometimes Scripture calls the Church, “The body of Christ” (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Eph. 4:12). Jesus Christ is the head, and each of us are attached to him as members of a body. That means that we are also attached to one another. It means we need each other. When a hand is missing—like the actual hand from your arm—it’s not just bad for the hand. I mean, it is really, really bad for the hand, but it’s also bad for the rest of the body.

Scripture also calls the Church a “dwelling place for God” (2:22) or “a spiritual house” made up of “living stones” (1 Pet. 2:5). In this imagery we are bricks built together with Jesus as the cornerstone. This communicates the same truth as the “body of Christ” picture. We need one another in order to stand, and our unity is based on Jesus Christ.

Again, these definitions aren’t really different from the first one I gave you. In all of them the Church is the congregation of saints, and the unity of believers comes from our union with Christ. Old theologians used to refer to a mystical union with Christ. Maybe “mystical” isn’t the most useful word these days, because it makes us think of some guru sitting alone on top of a Tibetan mountain. That’s not what we’re talking about. So it’s probably better these days to call it a “sacramental union.” Our Baptism into Christ is what joins us to Christ and, therefore, everyone else who is baptized into Jesus Christ. And as we receive the Lord’s Supper, we commune with Christ and have union with one another. So these other biblical definitions still support and agree with the first definition I gave you: “The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered.”

We see this definition at work in the parable of the wedding feast. It’s a congregation. It’s a grand and joyful assembly. The guests are all invited there by the Word of God. God is the king, who prepares a marvelous feast. He does all the work, and he spares no expense. Then he sends his servants to call the invited guests. The servants are the prophets, apostles, and preachers. They go out proclaiming the Word of God, and through that Word of God, the Holy Spirit calls people into Christ’s Church. But people respond to the Word differently. And this is the part of the parable we are most concerned with for this sermon. Most people ignore the invitation. I think I’ve mentioned before that many of Jesus’ parables have an element of absurdity in them.

This is absurd. When your king invites you to the wedding of his son, you go. This may be the greatest honor of your entire life. It will also be the finest meal you ever eat. That's for sure. This isn't the sort of thing where you say, "I think I have to wash my hair that night." Ignoring the invitation is foolish. But it becomes even more absurd when others attack and kill the servants. This is the part where we think, *Who wrote this script? That doesn't make any sense at all!* Who would kill a person for delivering a wedding invitation? Answer: no one. This is all just absurd. It doesn't correspond to reality, except it does. That's really what's going on when people ignore God's Word or even kill the messengers. God is inviting us to the eternal heavenly feast of his Son, Jesus Christ. Apathy and hostility are both absurd responses.

Then the king says about those invited guests, "[They] were not worthy" (22:8). No kidding! So he sent his army to destroy those murderers and burn their city. Then he sent his servants out to the main roads to invite everyone they can find, both bad and good. These are the travelers passing by. They're not even citizens of his kingdom. But the king just wants to fill up his banquet hall and give away his feast. This is also absurd. Who wants a wedding feast with a bunch of random strangers? It's like a wedding where every single guest in attendance is a wedding crasher. It's kind of embarrassing that the king would have to resort to this. But this corresponds to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church of God. God doesn't care who you are, where you came from, or what you've done. He wants you in his Kingdom, he wants to forgive you, and he wants to bless you with his heavenly feast.

This is a picture of Christ's Church. It is those called through the Word of God to come and eat Christ's feast.

We also see how one becomes worthy to enter. The king gave them wedding garments at the door. The guests were travelers. They didn't pack their formal wear. They probably didn't even have any formal wear. So the king clothed them in his own wedding garments. This is a picture of Christ's righteousness, which he gives freely to all who believe. At the cross he took our sin upon himself, and he gives us his own righteousness. His righteousness is like a white robe. It covers our wretchedness. It's what we sang about in "Behold the Host Arrayed in White." The host is Christ's Church. It's "the congregation of saints." That is, the assembly of believers clothed in Christ's righteousness. On earth it "is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered."

Our worship on Sunday mornings—what we're doing right now—is a call to that heavenly feast, and it is, at the same time, a foretaste of that feast.

So that's what the Church is. Now examine your own beliefs. Does your practical belief correspond to the biblical definition? Or is your practical belief something else? Perhaps you think of the Church more as a voluntary organization, like a club of like-minded individuals where you can come and go as you wish and only be as involved as you really want to. Or maybe you think of church merely as an event. So you don't really think of yourself as being a member of a body, but you occasionally come on Sundays to find some inspiration for the week. Or maybe it's where you get to see your friends. These, I think, are fairly common attitudes toward the Church. And there are other similar attitudes. I think the common theme among at least most of the false beliefs is the idea that it's optional. Church attendance is not optional. Hebrews 10 says, "Let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some (Heb. 10:25). Then Hebrews goes on to talk about how that absence can lead to apostasy, which results in eternal damnation. We should try to avoid that."

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I'm going to say something now that some might take issue with. You all brought your tomatoes to throw, right? Okay, hold onto them for a couple minutes. Let me finish the whole explanation before you decide I'm wrong. Here it is: You need to be here. And where is here? Trinity Free Lutheran Church. And when do you need to be here? Every Sunday. And I know many of you are watching on the livestream. And maybe that's the right thing for you to do right now. But you still need to be here. Now how can that be? Sometimes we have conflicting needs, like when you need to eat and you need to sleep. Sometimes we have to prioritize our needs. Sometimes a greater need even takes a back seat for a time because a lesser need is more urgent. You need to be here. But it may also be true that, for a time, you need to not be here, either for your own sake or for another person's. You may have conflicting needs. And if, for a time, you consider it more urgent to not be here, you still need to know that you are missing something you need.

I'm telling you this because, sometimes, when we prioritize our needs, we downgrade something from a need to a want. Or we might even downgrade it to an option. We can't do that with church. The stakes are too high. We're talking about your faith, and with it, eternal salvation. How we react to the Word of God has eternal consequences. We saw that in the parable of the wedding feast. You need to be here.

The livestream is good, but it's really not enough. And you need to know that before time proves it to you. It kind of suffices for the preaching of the Word, but it can't give fellowship or the sacraments, and you need those things. Those are essential elements of the Church. God designed it that way for a reason. You need to be here.

Now, I'm not saying everyone should come back next week. Staying home for a time may be the right choice. But you need to consider why you are staying home. Have you downgraded church to an option? You also need to consider what it will take to come back. As more time passes, missing church becomes more dangerous. I suspect some of you have experienced this. You need to be here. You may have conflicting needs, but you can't downgrade church from a need to something less.

I've been shy about saying this. And this goes back long before the pandemic. When I started ministry I thought, *I don't really need to tell people to come to church. All I need to do is preach a really good sermon every week and they'll just know.* It didn't work. Maybe the sermons aren't as good as I intended. Maybe there are too many distractions pulling you in other directions. I was naïve. Christians still need to be told what the will of God is for how we live. And you need to be here.

Sometimes, as an objection to this, I hear the proverb, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car." By the way, that proverb is not from the Bible. It's a silly proverb. Think about it. How does a car become a car? Well, it needs to go through a car factory. And how does a car remain operational? It needs to make scheduled visits to a garage. Otherwise it will cease to be a car and become a pile of rusted metal.

It is true that merely being in a church does not make you a Christian. But how do you become a Christian? Through the Word and Sacraments. And how do you remain a Christian? Through the Word and Sacraments. And that is what the Church is all about. The Church is the factory and garage for Christians.

Going to church is the most important thing you do in a week, because we're dealing with matters of eternal salvation. And the most important thing parents do for their children in a week is forcing them to go to church. Now that doesn't diminish the importance of going to work, or eating, or feeding your children, or reading the Bible at home. Those things are still just as

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important as they were five minutes ago. But the central activity of our Christian life is worship with God's people. Going to church is the most important thing you do in a week.

I've shied away from saying this, because I'm afraid I might be perceived as arrogant. The most important thing you do is an hour-long service in which I talk for half of it. Really? That sounds arrogant, doesn't it? But even if I preach a clunker every week, it's still true. As long as it's the Word of God forgiving your sins for Jesus' sake, it's the most important thing you will do in a week, because this is a matter of eternal salvation.

Okay. Thank you for the extra five minutes. I know I didn't ask for them. But I still didn't say half of what I wanted to say. And you can throw tomatoes now. Or you can stop by my office this week or call me on the telephone. Verbal tomatoes are also accepted.

God is calling you to a wedding feast. The feast is in the new creation. And this, right here, right now, is both the invitation to it and a foretaste of it. You need to be here. Maybe you're not worthy to attend the feast. Honestly, you're not. But God calls you anyway, and he clothes you in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the righteousness he earned for you at the cross and delivers to you through his Word and Sacraments. It will be the feast of eternity. You need to be there. And until then, you need to be here. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.