Sermon from
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Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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When I was little, I had my images of God and Jesus. There was, of course, the old man in the sky with the white beard and glowing face. There were the images that went along with artwork I had seen of a very white Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulders or like the picture at the front of my childhood church, with him reaching down to save Peter from drowning. I had my understandings too, that Jesus loved me, but didn't necessarily love bad people, those who swore or cheated or were mean or sexually promiscuous. All these images and understandings were mixed up with other images and understandings that aligned or conflicted with what my parents told me, what scripture said, what culture found useful, tradition valued, and experience showed true. All of us have our images of God and our understanding of who God is. Thankfully, I outgrew some of mine.

Whenever we read scripture, or anything else for that matter, we need to consider three questions: What is this teaching me about God? What is this teaching me about humanity and the whole of creation? And What is this teaching me about myself and my life as a follower of Jesus? Remembering that we, as Lutheran Christians, read scripture through the lens of Jesus' work on the cross and the grace that is given; that we consider it within the whole arching story of the Bible; and we discuss meaning and insight with other Christian tradition throughout history and contexts, we can think about today's parable in the gospel of Matthew with deeper wisdom and clarity. This is a difficult parable.

So let's consider our questions:
What is this parable teaching us about God? If the King is supposed to represent God, what does that tell us about God's character? On the one hand, the King invites. Multiple times an invitation is given. He offers a banquet of good food and abundant joy. When the people refuse to come, making light of the invitation and making up excuses, the King opens the invitation to everyone- good and bad alike- filling the banquet hall with people off the street. All are welcome! God is a welcoming God. On the other hand, the King gets angry at people ignoring his invitation, so angry in fact that he destroys the whole city, setting it on fire and killing those who murdered his servants. An eye for an eye and then some. He is violent and reactive to violence committed against Him, His servants, and His invitation. Still more, the King upon seeing his guests arrive, notices a man without the proper attire and kicks him out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. What do we make of that? It is troubling. Let's table that for a moment. We'll come back to it.

Next question: What is the parable teaching us about humanity and the whole of creation? The people in this text act in various ways. We have some that "make light of the invitation," one going back to his farm, another to his business. Their lives and livelihood seem to be more important than taking time to celebrate with the King on the occasion of his Son's wedding. People do respond this way to God much of the time. We are hesitant to be too enthusiastic about God, after all we have other priorities. Then there are others in the parable who are outright cruel toward the King's messengers- treating them harshly and killing them. There are many people in our world who are hostile toward God and religion in particular. So perhaps the parable checks out in showing us human nature and humanity's response to God.

And yet, we know not everyone behaves this way. So, when the King invites others off the streets, many come ready for the feast. So, when we ask the question: What does this parable teach us about ourselves and our lives as followers of Jesus? we might consider our own response to God. Do we

make excuses, make light of God's invitation, and go our own way? Do we tend to be hostile toward God, suspicious of God's messengers, violent in our attitudes toward the church? OR are we the ones who enter the banquet, good and bad alike, receiving the grace of God? Perhaps this parable challenges us to find joy in being with the King, prioritizing God's invitation to us above all other commitments. Will we respond with joy when God invites us to feast with Him and celebrate the Son? Will we drop everything and join in the festivities?

Okay, back to the image of an angry God. Traditionally, the Gospel of Matthew hasn't shied away from God's anger and wrath, especially when that anger is aimed at a people who refuse to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. In the time that the gospel of Matthew was written, the people were trying to make sense of the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. How could this happen? Where was God? Pastor and Theologian David Lose states, "Matthew is writing his Gospel in order to offer comfort, assurance, guidance, exhortation, and encouragement to a fledgling community of early believers, largely Jewish, who are caught up in a fierce sibling rivalry with their former community members even as they are trying to fit into the new reality of Roman domination. It's in this context that Matthew describes Jesus as telling a string of parables that more or less depict God's rejection of those who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah, even going so far as to describe the destruction of the Temple as God's righteous judgment." Lose suggests that Matthew's understanding of God had limits, just like our own, and that we need to correct such notions that lead us to antisemitic outcomes.

We have the opportunity (and perhaps responsibility) to interpret Jesus' parable alongside the rest of the gospel and the person of Jesus and his work on the cross. The God we experience in Jesus, who lived preaching good news, healing the sick, and casting out demons; who died on a cross- a method of execution designed for maximum pain, shame, and humiliation; and who rose again to save the world from sin forgiving even those who killed him, starkly contrasts the vengeful King in the parable. We must look

at the big story of scripture, the big picture of God, and the truth of who God is revealed to be in Christ. And we must remember that God has a vested interest in His people. God loves us and our response to this love matters. The God we know through Jesus offers amazing grace, but it is not cheap grace. It is not an "everything goes" kind of grace; it is not a "do whatever you please and you'll get away with it" kind of grace, which brings us back to the man who showed up without the appropriate attire.

In the letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul, instructs the church to be clothed in Christ. The image of believers wearing a garment of righteousness, of peace, compassion, humility, and love, is long-held and beautiful. We are welcome and invited by God, sinner and saint, but we must be clothed in Christ, in the very love of God that covers all wrongs. It is after all his party, a feast celebrating the union of the Son and his bride the church.

So, what have we learned? God wants us at the party. God has a vested interest and a great love for His people. He invites us and welcomes all people to join in the feast. Humanity often rejects God's invitation, prioritizing other things and taking life with God too lightly. When we do come with rejoicing, celebrating the union of the Son of God with his bride the church- let's be sure to be clothed in Christ. Our response to God matters. *And* when parables confuse us and make us stumble, let us dig in together and consider "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, let us think about those things." We might still have questions. We might still struggle to understand God's anger. But we will still be able to cling to the truths we discern together to be excellent and worthy of praise.

Amen