

"An Invitation – Black Shoes and Appropriately Dressed"

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23;
Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

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

"Of course, you'll have to be at the theater every night of the week, and that will include Saturday night. And you are required to have with you a pair of black shoes. Let me know when the lecture is over if you would like to be part of this exercise." It was a speech class in college, and I was one of the students waiting for that lecturer at the end of the class. She had offered an invitation I couldn't refuse: to appear in the New Zealand Opera Company's production of *Carmen*.

There were six of us who were looking for parts as walk-on soldiers. Uniforms were provided. Black dress shoes were required so that the black leggings they gave us to put over our shoes and legs would make it look as though we were wearing cavalry boots, some sort of knee-high army dress.

The writer of the gospel as we heard it read this morning talks of another amazing invitation – Jesus' invitation to salvation, delivered in a wonderful analogy of a great, royal wedding feast.

Just think for a moment; just sit back, relax and imagine that you have been invited to Buckingham Palace for a great royal wedding. Can you see it? There would be certain protocol, and I guess there would be certain special clothes we would have to wear. I can see the shopping list in my mind already; I mean after all, it is a royal wedding, a once in a lifetime event. I guess you couldn't avoid having a new outfit, a new suit or dress. Maybe new jewelry, a new watch, new makeup, a new tie. Then there would be the beauty parlor and the barber shop. I know all this, because I've recently come from a wedding.

You all know what it's like when you're invited to a wedding. But just think of it – a royal wedding – imagine that. And what a peculiar wedding this is, at least when we look at the gospel. Actually, it's quite a nasty and brutal affair all round. First of all, the very people you'd expect to be falling all over themselves to get to the wedding, don't even bother to show up. Even on a second invitation. Personally delivered. But it's worse than that. When the king sends out the second invitation, the messengers who deliver it are put to death, killed. The king is enraged. He's not peeved; he's not miffed, he's ENRAGED! And not over the fact that the food at the banquet is getting cold. He dispatches his army. He puts the unresponsive official guests to the sword, and destroys home, farm and city; the whole lot goes up in smoke.

What on earth is Jesus talking about? Is this some sort of fairy tale? Or is there a germ of truth hidden in this? We've heard the theme before. Do you remember the wicked servants and the vineyard? The absentee landlord had gone and the tenant farmers got the bright idea of withholding the rent; they just kept everything for themselves. And then when rent collectors were sent, they were put to death. And finally when the absentee landowner sent his son, they killed him, too, thinking that they had it made . . . only to find that they were thrown out of the vineyard when the master returned. And he hands the whole kit and caboodle over to someone else.

That's a theme we recognize. And we understand it, just as the original hearers did, that it's about the reaction of the Jewish establishment to what the prophets had to say, to the life of Jesus and His message of salvation, which finally led to the inclusion of the Gentiles – us, you and me, adopted children of God. The chosen, if you will.

Here in this morning's gospel, it's the self same theme. Those who heard this story would immediately recognize that the target was the Jewish religious and political leadership of the time and those who followed along behind them like sheep, rejecting everything Jesus offered.

The slaughter and the burning had occurred before the writing of this gospel when the Romans invaded Jerusalem, and the whole bundle, all of it, understood to be a consequence of rejecting God's new offer of forgiveness, restoration and salvation, delivered as it was, in and through the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Back to the story. Having erased those on the first list of guests, the king sent out his slaves, servants and disciples, to invite, in his words, "everyone you find". This is not a select list. It's not a list of just those who are worthy. It's not a list that's favored by those who are carrying the invitation. It's an invitation to the worthy and the unworthy alike. It's an invitation to the good and the bad alike. It's an invitation to the law abiding and the law breaking alike. It's an all inclusive invitation. And you'll hear it again this morning when the wine is elevated and Christ's words are repeated, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, she for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin".

The guest list to the wedding feast of the Lamb seems to be absolutely wide open. And it's right at this point that the story takes another turn and becomes even more disconcerting. First, although all are invited, not everyone (and this is so important to understand), not everyone who is invited accepts the invitation. Like the guests on the first list, they have more important things to do with their lives, and the outcome of their inattention and rejection is set and inescapable. Unless of course, they haven't been invited. In which case, the slaves of the kingdom, the servants of God, the disciples of Christ, haven't bothered to extend the invitation to anyone. "But", we want to say, "but what about those we know who clearly oughtn't be invited – surely we don't invite them?" "No way", says the king. "You follow my instructions." Make sure you're invited, and invite everyone you meet. Because you see, the truth of the matter is, the King will manage the inappropriate guests (should there be any) and His management is deadly.

And this leads us to another nasty turn in the story, because the king does come across an inappropriately dressed guest, and suddenly the wedding isn't at all as inclusive as it first seemed. It would appear that none of the guests noticed anything, at least insofar as one of them was inappropriately attired, but the king doesn't miss it. He's enraged again. Not peeved, not miffed, ENRAGED! The king summons his attendants and commands them, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth". The inadequately dressed guest isn't just thrown out on the street; he's cast into the jaws of hell itself.

You see, the gospel really doesn't have Jesus talking about a wedding feast at all. Far from it. The wedding feast is just a vehicle for Jesus to talk about judgment, and those who will go to heaven and those who will go to hell, and whose judgment it is that makes the difference.

The same for the clothing that's being talked about in the story. It's not really clothing that's the issue, jackets and blouses and shirts and ties. No. That's far from the truth. It's about the very nature of Christian identity. It's about the very nature of our Christian identity, your Christian identity, my Christian identity. That's the crux of the matter in the gospel, the crux of the matter here, in this hour of worship, where we are waiting to go to a foretaste of the great wedding feast that will be at our salvation.

Our attendance here this morning demonstrates to everyone that we've accepted the invitation, or at least we're curious enough to come and find out about it. The question is, are we appropriately dressed? Do our lives demonstrate our faith? Just as the original listeners heard the story and agreed with God's judgment against those Jews who had rejected Jesus and remained faithful to the establishment, the tables turned for them. Just when it seemed they could make the judgment, they're suddenly forced to look at themselves. Just when it seems the followers of Jesus are home safe, for they have accepted the invitation, one of them turns out to be an ineligible guest.

Surprisingly, accepting the invitation alone isn't enough to secure one's salvation. Something more is required. What is it James says? "Without works faith is dead." Something more is required. In the words of the story, appropriate clothing; in reality, the unmistakable sign of Christ-like living. Is it absolutely clear in what we do and say that Christ is our Lord? Is it clearly evident in how we live and how we work? Can people see it in the way we spend our time? Is it obvious in what we do with our money? Is our discipleship evident? Are we "appropriately dressed"? For failing to have on the right clothes is fatal and leads directly to hell.

What a rugged, nasty, tough little story. But did you catch the last line? It might seem, right now, that no one is ever going to make the grade. But hear what it says, "Many are called, but few are chosen!" And in that little line, smuggled away, is the gospel. And the gospel of the story is simply this: now that you've heard about the wedding; now that you know what clothes to wear, do with your life in Christ what you would do with your dress, should you be invited to the royal wedding, protocol and all. Having

heard the story, we have the opportunity to change our clothes, to allow our lives to be remade and transformed.

It was the opening night, the rehearsals were over – this was the real thing! The producer was stalking around backstage and suddenly he barked, pointing at me, "YOU! Where the [unmentionable string of words] are your shoes? Get them changed now or you don't go on period!" I was mortified. I could barely breathe. My stomach had clenched itself into a knot smaller than a dime. I looked at my feet . . . and my shoes . . . were brown. But there was time – just enough. A quick phone call home and salvation was on its way. The local bus company had a terminus outside our home, and there happened to be a bus sitting there. My mother ran to the bus, the driver got the shoes, and following his normal route, brought the shoes into the depot in the city, and a cab driver picked up the shoes at the depot and brought them to the theater, and I was able to wear them.

I had accepted the invitation, I was appropriately dressed, and I was in the opera on the opening night of *Carmen*.

Amen.