

The 19th Sunday After Pentecost

October 11, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

First Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9

¹O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. ²For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. ³Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. ⁴For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, ⁵the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. ⁶On 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. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other 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.' ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him,



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‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

When I read through the Bible texts for this Sunday, a few different images came to my mind. The first image was of the wedding reception my wife and I had on the day of our wedding. When I thought about it, I realized that it was quite the hodgepodge of guests from the different chapters of mine and Kristin’s lives. We had high school friends, college friends, members of my dad’s side of the family and my mom’s side of the family; members from Kristin’s dad’s side of the family (unfortunately, no members from Kristin’s mother’s side of the family could attend since most of them live overseas in Germany), and other folks that were teachers, congregation members, and other members of the community. All of them were invited to partake in the feast to celebrate Kristin and my marriage.

At the feast there were many tables set up where people sat. The food was bountiful and very tasty. There was champagne for toasting and cake for dessert. Many of our guests tore it up on the dance floor to end the party. It was a wonderful celebration, and we were thankful that so many different people from our lives could be a part of it.

Of course, that same diverse group of people from our lives had also feasted together at another table just earlier that same day. It was such a blessing that Kristin and I got to serve each of our guests the body and blood of Jesus Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion at our wedding ceremony. At that table, every single one of our guests were united under the grace and love of God, just as they were united at our wedding feast in celebrating our marriage, which was also a celebration of love.

The next image that came into my mind was years later when I was at seminary. It was our Wednesday Eucharist worship service in the chapel of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. There, too, in worship was a diversity of students and faculty representing different places, different races, and different cultures from around the world. There were students and faculty from different countries in Africa and Asia, Europe, South America, and North America.



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Now, of course, we as a seminary community, celebrated Holy Communion every Wednesday during the school year, but this particular Holy Communion service sticks out in my mind because I got to be one of the communion servers during Holy Communion distribution. I was even fortunate enough to get to serve the wine. Now this wasn't the only time I was a server at Holy Communion during seminary; but, again, this particular Eucharist sticks out in my mind because, as I was serving this diverse community the wine, it struck me how special it was that I was offering these people "the blood of Christ shed for you." It was special because I was sharing this amazing gift of forgiveness and salvation to such a diversity of people that it made me really think for the first time what it meant that Jesus died on the cross for the sake of the whole world. Here was a representation of the whole world receiving the blood of Christ from me! It was also special because it affirmed my feeling called to ministry. I was excited that I got to serve Holy Communion, and that was going to be a part of my job for the rest of my life!

Being a seminary student and a pastor, I have had the privilege of serving the body of blood of Christ at several different Holy Communion tables. Each time has been special, for every table has been full of wonderful people that are God's beloved. There was no greater joy for me than to serve a small child who held out their hand for the first time. It was always humbling serving a congregation member whom I knew was suffering in some way. Many tears were shed when I served each previous community for the last time before I moved on to my next call. Finally, it has always been healing for me when one of my assisting ministers served me the body and blood of Christ.

I have come to experience the Eucharistic table as a place that is holy and sacred. It is a place where everyone, no matter who they are, are invited to come together and share in the love and grace of God poured out in, with, and under the bread and wine. It is the place where God is the host of the meal. It is the place where all people come as equals—rich and poor; people of color and white people; all genders and all sexual orientations; those whose faith is strong and those who are in doubt; democrats and republicans; all ages; all languages; all people, for God invites all the beloved to come, which includes all people.

And as it states in our Isaiah reading this morning, the Holy Communion table is the place where God will gather all nations together. It is the place where not only will we experience rich food and well-aged wines, but it is the place where God promises to destroy the shroud of death; to wipe away every tear; and take away the disgrace of all people. And God does



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this through the promise that this cup is the new covenant in Christ's blood shed for all of us for the forgiveness of sins. When we partake in the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine, because of Christ being present in that bread and wine, Christ literally becomes a part of us. And since Christ now abides in us, Christ not only cleanses us from our sins, but strengthens our faith as well. This even happens at the virtual Holy Communion table!

Because this feast cleanses us from sin and strengthens our faith, it then frees us to go out and invite others to come and experience this life-giving feast that God has prepared for all people. In doing so, we are increasing the diversity of the table which will enrich the life of our faith community. All it takes is for us to extend the invitation, and like in our gospel reading from today, we are free to go into every street corner and invite both those in society that are seen and good and bad. After all, Jesus often ate with what was considered the despised and riffraff of society.

What would it look like if each person here invited just one other person to join us for our next Holy Communion worship in two weeks? How much more diverse could we make this sacred table? It is my hope that the ELCA as a whole will work towards inviting a greater diversity of people to come and see that the Lord is good at the Holy Communion table. How might some of the divisions, tribalism, and general hatred come to an end when all come as equals to experience the love of God in the bread of life and cup of salvation; the sacred table where God will destroy the shroud of death, wipe away tears, and remove any disgrace that burdened us?

After all, it is here at the Holy Communion table where we can lay down anything that divides us, where we can see each other as beloved, and receive together, as complete equals, the amazing gift that is the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is at this table that we truly receive the foretaste of the feast to come. And to me, there is no greater hope and sign of the fact that God's kingdom has come.

Amen.

