MATTHEW 22:1–14. (EHV)

> Jesus spoke to them again in parables. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out his servants to summon those who were invited to the wedding banquet, but they did not want to come. Then he sent out other servants and said, 'Tell those who are invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!' But those who were invited paid no attention and went off, one to his own farm, another to his business. The rest seized the king's servants, mistreated them, and killed them. As a result, the king was very angry. He sent his army and killed those murderers and burned their town. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. So go to the main crossroads and invite as many as you find to the wedding banquet.' Those servants went out to the roads and gathered together everyone they found, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wearing wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the servants, 'Tie him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Did you have a big wedding or a small one? And what would you recommend to a young couple seeking your advice about the size of their wedding?

Certainly a wedding is still a wedding even if it's not a grand affair. Back during the pandemic, a brother pastor told me that he had conducted two weddings that simply took place after the sermon during the Sunday service, like a confirmation or an installation of church leaders would. Yet everyone involved still experienced joy with those weddings, perhaps even more joy than usual, since those small ceremonies also offered a sort of comfort, by reminding everyone present that life marched on, that people were still marrying and starting new families.

And sometimes couples choose to have a small wedding even when circumstances don't force them to. If you were to ask them why they chose a small wedding, they might cite financial responsibility, a more intimate and romantic setting, or the fact that, without all the fuss and fanciness, the main focus tends to be on the main thing at the wedding—a man and a woman willingly and sincerely committing their love and faithfulness to each other for as long as they both shall live.

But for all of that, there is one huge advantage of a big wedding that even Christians who prefer small weddings can't deny: A well-planned, big wedding with well-dressed guests, delicious food, and laughter and dancing in abundance is a far better foreshadowing of the ultimate wedding feast—which is definitely going to be a grand affair. Yes, Jesus describes eternal life in heaven as a wedding feast. This is one of at least four parables in which he makes that comparison. And just like with a normal wedding on earth, invitations are required for attendance. This morning we want to look at **Jesus's wedding invitation**. We will see how it is an invitation extended to all, but accepted by few.

1. Extended to All

Jesus told this parable of the wedding invitation at the same time that he told the parable of the vineyard tenants that we heard last week. It was during Holy Week, prior to Jesus's betrayal and death. After that parable, Matthew says that the Jewish chief priest and the Pharisees knew that Jesus had spoken that parable against them. Matthew introduces this parable by telling us that Jesus is still speaking to them. He begins: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out his servants to summon those who were invited to the wedding banquet, but they did not want to come."

So a king prepares a wedding banquet for his son, and he sends out invitations to people in a certain city who find favor in his eyes. But while the invitations inform these people about this magnificent wedding, they don't actually say when the wedding is going to be. So the king needs to send out his servants to follow up on the invitations and to tell those who have been invited, "It's time for the wedding. Come." But Jesus says simply that they didn't want to come.

So the king "sent out other servants and said, 'Tell those who are invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!'" The king figures, "They must not know how awesome this wedding is going to be, that it is going to be the best wedding they have ever attended. I need to give them some more details to whet their appetites. I need to show them that this is an invitation they simply cannot afford to refuse." So he sends the second round of servants to portray the richest food sitting there, just waiting to be eaten.

But the reaction this time is even worse than simple refusal. "Those who were invited paid no attention and went off, one to his own farm, another to his business. The rest seized the king's servants, mistreated them, and killed them." The people the king invited were more concerned about their earthly affairs, more concerned about the life and work and opportunities to make money right in front of them, that they could see, rather than this wedding feast that they could not see. Some even got so angry at this second round of servants for interrupting their earthly life and pursuits a second time, that they seized them, mistreated them, and killed them.

"As a result," Jesus continues, "the king was very angry. He sent his army and killed those murderers and burned their town." So much for the people initially invited to the wedding feast.

But the king isn't finished.

"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. So go to the main crossroads and invite as many as you find to the wedding banquet.' Those servants went out to the roads and gathered together everyone they found, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."

The king essentially says, "Okay, my initial invitees didn't want to come, but this wedding feast is too good to be enjoyed by nobody. So let's expand the invitation list. Open up this wedding to everybody—whether rich or poor, whether familiar or foreigner, whether known as a good person or a bad person." And he filled the wedding hall with guests in this way.

This first part of this parable is very similar to the parable of the tenants we heard last week. The vineyard owner sends his servants out twice to collect his share of fruit from the vineyard, but the tenants mistreated and killed them. Finally he sent his son but they killed him too. Much the same happens here. The invitees ignore the first set of servants, and the second

wave of servants they mistreat and kill. This first group of invitees are the Israelite or Jewish people. They were the people who found favor in the eyes of the Lord, the people he chose to be his own, the people among whom he proclaimed his promise of the Messiah. But when he sent his prophets to proclaim law and gospel and to call the people to repent of their worldly-mindedness and worldly trust, and to call them to trust in him alone, they ignored them, mistreated them, or worse. We covered the most prominent examples of that last week.

And it's not like the invitation was a nuisance. Just like in this parable, God made his grace and promises more and more attractive as he continued to send his prophets. As beautiful as some songs and prophecies of Moses are, they pale in comparison to what you find in the psalms of David and in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, which describe the beauty and majesty and shepherd-like care of the Messiah in gripping terms, and which make us yearn for the delights of heaven, as the First Lesson from Isaiah did today. And think of how many sayings of Jesus comfort and reassure us still today, and give us joy and peace even in the midst of our sadness and grief.

But by and large, the Jewish people rejected the invitation. And what Jesus alludes to in this parable when he says that the king sent his army and killed those murderers and burned their town came true not long after he ascended into heaven, when the Roman army besieged, breached, and burned Jerusalem in 70 AD. The siege began shortly before Passover, when there were more than a million people in Jerusalem, and it lasted about four months. Some starving people ate their own children, and many innocents were butchered by the Roman army.

But there was still a wedding feast to be enjoyed. As Paul and Barnabas told the Jews living in Antioch in Pisidia, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." The Gentiles had access to the invitation before, but only indirectly, through the Jewish people. But after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the invitation also went directly to the Gentiles, yes, to all people everywhere, including to you and me. The invitation to the eternal wedding banquet, to eternal life through Jesus Christ, is extended to all.

2. Accepted by Few

But now that Jesus has told one and a half parables against the Jewish leaders, it's like he wants to make sure that the others to whom the invitation will go out don't take the invitation for granted and share the same fate.

Remember, everyone has now been invited to the wedding, and the wedding hall has been packed. But before the feast begins: "The king came in to see the guests, [and] he saw a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wearing wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the servants, 'Tie him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

You see, this wedding invitation is unique, in that it also comes with a wedding outfit. You don't have to pull one out from the closet or go out and buy a new one. In fact, if you try to clothe yourself for this wedding, Jesus just said what your fate will be.

When we see this man who was so close and yet so far, I can't help but think of the words Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter

the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" And Jesus said on a different occasion what the will of his Father is: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." In other words: Wear the wedding clothes he provides with his invitation.

Jesus's words also remind me of the teacher of the law who asked about the greatest of the commandments and who understood that "to love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices," and to whom Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But he did not say, "You are in the kingdom of God," because he was still trying to put on his own wedding outfit.

I could just quote hymn verses the rest of the sermon. We already sang this one: "Jesus, your blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress; mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head." The writer of "Rock of Ages" understood: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly—wash me, Savior, or I die!" And the great Lutheran hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt wrote: "Lord, when your glory I shall see and taste your kingdom's pleasure, your blood my royal robe shall be, my joy beyond all measure! When I appear before your throne, your righteousness shall be my crown; with these I need not hide me. And there, in garments richly wrought, as your own bride I shall be brought to stand in joy beside you."

Brothers and sisters, many are called, but few are chosen. Jesus's wedding invitation is extended to all, but accepted by comparatively few, because we are so proud that we do not want to confess that we are lost if eternal life depends on us in any way, that Jesus and Jesus alone must be the beginning, middle, and end of our righteousness and eternal life. Cling to the faith given to you in your baptism. Cling to the robe of the Bridegroom's righteousness issued with the invitation to his wedding. This alone will afford you the certainty of eternal life. This alone will assure you that you are one of the few, one of the chosen of God.

Jesus's wedding invitation is extended to all, and accepted by few. But with your eyes on Jesus, you can rest assured that you will have a place at his big and glorious wedding feast. Amen.