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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 22:1-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

When I was in college and taking courses in classroom management, I was taught to use “positive reinforcement.” Instead of hollering at children to “stop running” in the hallway, we were trained to say calmly, “please walk.” When I wanted a noisy class to settle down, I would notice and thank those who were seated, or had their pencil ready, or whatever behavior I was looking for.

And I adopted a point system from some other teachers, in which students received point cards for doing what was asked of them. We would add those points together at the end of each day, with the promise of a party when we reached a predetermined goal.

But every now and then, there were times when that didn’t work. Sometimes I needed to threaten taking away something fun. Sometimes a student needed to see the principal, or a parent needed to be called in. Sometimes, it was the negative consequence, or the threat of it, that motivated a change in behavior.

Most of the time, we prefer to pay attention to the positive aspects of Jesus’ ministry, his love and forgiveness, especially for the outcasts in the world. But in the parable Jesus tells us today, and the two before this one, Jesus is not so positive, not so gentle, not so gracious. Jesus’ words are downright harsh and even threatening. How are we to interpret being thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”?

Let’s remember where Jesus is and to whom he is speaking in this part of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, with the crowds cheering him on and declaring him to be the Son of David, which essentially names him as a king. He enters the temple where he scolds the temple leaders, heals people, and teaches about the kingdom of heaven through a series of parables.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had been calling people into new relationship with God by eating with them, healing them, and bringing them back into community—with God and with their neighbors. He has taught them about God’s love, and extended the covenant God made with Israel to others.

But the time is drawing short to bring God’s love and promise himself. He knows he is headed to the cross and it will soon be time for others to take over. It would be logical for those who already belong to God to carry on the life and work of Jesus, the Messiah. Eventually, eleven of his disciples, and many others who have been his closest followers, will become leaders of the Christian church.

But it is not only up to those in leadership positions to live in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is teaching us that all who are invited are meant to respond with lives of obedience, bearing fruit of the kingdom, with an all-in commitment to being transformed by God’s love.

So, Jesus has some harsh words for those who are hearing the invitation to life in the kingdom of heaven, but not responding to it.

In the parable we heard today the king who throws a wedding banquet for his son invites all the expected guests, those who already belong to his kingdom. And every single one of them refuses to attend. Not only that, as in last week's parable, they beat up and kill the servants sent by the king.

So, the king extends the invitation to anyone and everyone, "the good and the bad." There are no qualifications—except one. Once they accept the invitation, they must wear a wedding robe. The one in the parable who was caught not wearing it seemed to have no excuse and was thrown out.

Jesus ends with the warning, "For many are called, but few are chosen." This is not the language we hear too often in the Lutheran tradition. Other denominations focus more on God choosing the few and basing salvation on whether or not believers are good enough to be chosen. We like to focus on God's grace, so that salvation is not earned but gladly received—through faith. The piece we sometimes overlook is that when we receive God's grace through faith, we are meant to live lives that are transformed.

The covenant God makes with us in Holy Baptism is a covenant that God initiates and to which we are to respond by the ways we live. God gives us every possible chance to live out our side of the covenant.

God gives us life and hope and forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God gives us the Holy Spirit to accompany and help us all of our days. And God gives us a community that is meant to nurture faith and the transformation of life of all who belong to God.

God gives us all of these gifts SO THAT God's love and grace would be the fruits of the kingdom we share with others, SO THAT all people, the good and bad, would be invited into the kingdom, SO THAT God is glorified and others would be drawn to the light of Christ.

But the truth is, we don't always obey and do as God asks us to do. We want to keep what we have for ourselves, forgetting that it is only by God's generosity that we have what we have. We often ignore God's invitation to be in God's presence and celebrate the gift of God's Son. And once we think we have God's promises in the bag, we do not clothe ourselves with Christ, as Paul describes the Christian life in his letter to the Galatians.¹

Sometimes we need a harsh word to wake us up to our disobedience and the ways we take our place in God's kingdom for granted and live only for ourselves.

This fall we have moved the Confession of Sins to follow the hearing of God's Word and the proclamation of faith in the Apostles' Creed. After we have heard God's calling to us, and perhaps recognized where we fall short, we profess our faith in all of who God is—Creator, Savior, and Sustainer of our faith and the Christian community.

With confidence in God's grace, we admit our failings and ask for forgiveness, "so that we may delight in [God's] will and walk in [God's] ways, to the glory of [God's] holy name."

¹ Galatians 3:27

We receive forgiveness in the words that follow the confession, and again in the Meal when we remember Jesus' promise to be present in the bread and wine, "for the forgiveness of sin."

Have you noticed that this meal is also known as The Great Thanksgiving? In response to Jesus' invitation to his Holy Supper we are renewed in heart and mind, and then in our daily living. This meal is our thanksgiving to God who has poured out his love for us through the Son.

I cannot tell you if there really is an "outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." But when we reject God's invitation, when we do not do the work of the kingdom, and when we resist the transformation God intends for us, the consequence is we end up living apart from God.

And where we live apart from the light of God's love and grace, we will live in darkness. Where there is no hope, there will be weeping. This is the hard truth that Jesus brings to us today.

The good news is that we have more than just today's passage on which to base our faith. We have a Bible filled with stories of lives that are transformed by God's love and grace, stories that serve as a promise to the possibility our own transformation. We have stories of God extending invitation after invitation, from Genesis to Jesus to Paul and the other New Testament authors, so that every generation and every nation is welcomed into the kingdom of heaven.

God does not give up on inviting us, gathering us, gifting us, and loving us. Let us be renewed today and every day in this truth. And let us be continually transformed, as servants of our king, to serve as a beacon of God's light to the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

With confidence in God's grace and mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Gracious host, fill your church with a spirit of joyous hospitality. We pray for bishops, teachers, church leaders, and all children of God as we invite others to your table of boundless grace. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious host, restore damaged places to fruitfulness, especially in places of wildfires and severe storms. We give you thanks for the harvests of this season and pray that animals and people alike would receive the food they need.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious host, as you set a table for all peoples, so bless the efforts of diplomats, international peace workers, and world leaders who navigate conflict. Guide leaders of nations as they attend to the needs of the poor. Preserve our country from discord, rancor, and violence, and inspire our election process with justice and civility. May justice and peace prevail in this and every land. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious host, let your gentleness be known among those who are weary or ill, especially in the rising numbers of those inflicted by the coronavirus. Strengthen doctors, medical care workers, and caretakers who see to their needs. We place in your loving care those who are listed in our bulletin today, and those we name before you in our hearts. *wait*
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious host, encourage teachers and school staff who serve students in school and through distance learning. Bless parents and students as they attend to learning in challenging times. Grant patience, creativity, and gentleness to all.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious host, we remember those who have died and are gathered at the heavenly banquet, especially our sister, Ann Carter. Comfort us with your presence and assure us of your peace at all times. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Listen as we call on you, O God, and enfold in your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.