



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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**EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST**

**October 12, 2014**

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## **“Both the Bad and the Good”**

*(Matthew 22:1-14)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matthew 22:8-10).*

## **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, You invite us to trust in You for our salvation. Deal with us not in the severity of Your judgment but by the greatness of Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

Back in the early 90's, Gail and I went on a trip to southern California and made arrangements to see the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Tickets were free and were offered on a first come first serve basis. Not wanting to be left out we went early and actually found ourselves near the front of the line. It dawned on us we might even be able to sit in the first row and shake Leno's hand when he comes out. Someone might recognize us on national T.V.

While we were waiting, a couple of employees of the show came out and started giving tickets to those in line, but they were doing it carefully, very deliberately, pulling different colored tickets out for different people with assigned rows and seats. When we got in we found ourselves in the very upper right hand corner of the studio, in the dark, where the lights of the camera never shine. It dawned on us, for whatever reason, Gail and I were not the kind of people the Tonight Show wanted on camera, not even the backs of our heads. Apparently, they were targeting a different demographic, a different studio audience. I'd love to talk to those guys and find out what it was about us that didn't fit into their preferred image. Were we not young enough? Hip enough? Was it our clothing? What was it about us that made us undesirable, not their kind of people?

How about you? Ever feel like you were excluded and don't know why? If you're young, maybe it happened when your friends had a sleepover, but for some reason you were not invited. It makes you feel like an outsider, right? Or when you applied to colleges and received vague, form letters informing you your application was denied. Any way you slice it, the fact is you're just not the kind of student they want. You are an undesirable. It can happen at work too. You're the manager, and you've had to make some difficult decisions. Suddenly, your approval rating tanks among the staff, and you find yourself a pariah, a persona non

grata, on the outside looking in.

Country clubs are notorious for being exclusive. Jack Nicklaus, one of the best golfers in history and a consummate gentleman was denied membership at the exclusive Seminole Golf Club in Juno Beach Florida. Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, crazy rich was kept out of Augusta National for years. Bob Hope quipped his own club (Pebble Beach), once “had a big membership drive. They drove out 40 members.”

Something of the exact opposite of all that is happening in the parable Jesus told where the king is holding a wedding celebration for his Son and he tells his servants, “Go out to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.” And so they do. With reckless abandon “they gathered all whom they found, both bad and good.”

You recall in the parable, the first wave of invitations from the King was met with stunning indifference. The guests whom the king invited simply were not interested. We’re not told why; they just don’t come. The king is miffed. Maybe they don’t understand. Who would snub the King’s invitation? Who would want to miss that celebration? This feast isn’t going to be a hot dog, chips and a limp pickle on a paper plate. It’s going to be fit for a king. “See, I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered. Everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!” The servants vigorously relay the king’s invitation, but surprisingly, those invited aren’t interested. The text says, “They paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business.”

You know, that is still happening. God the Father has prepared a feast of rich things in paradise, a wedding feast between Christ and his bride, the church. All the preparations have been made. All is ready. All are invited. But across the country and also in Watertown, the King’s invitation is being met with cold indifference! Even our own hearts are capable of growing apathetic and listless. David wrote, “I was glad when they said, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Ps. 122:1), but for many, even on our own roster,

they are not glad, and they just cannot seem to bring themselves to the Lord's House. That we, regular people from Watertown have been invited to the King's eternal banquet! That should knock our socks off, but as it is, it hardly even registers. "They paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business." Call it what you want: "cold indifference" or "the atheism of distraction." Either way, they're sending in their regrets and missing the most important feast ever. Hell is not merely a sentence imposed by God. It is first and foremost a choice made by people. "Come!" said the King. "But they paid no attention."

Then the parable takes a surprising turn. Some "seized the servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them." Granted, that usually doesn't happen when wedding invitations are sent out. Whenever a parable departs from reality like this, it's a good idea to zero in and ask why? What point is Jesus making? Surely, this points to the ancient Israelites who stoned so many of God's servants, his prophets. Surely it points to King Herod who put John the Baptist to death. Surely it points to the Roman Empire who would put Early Christians to death. And surely it points to those who mistreating and killing Christians today. Still today, the King's invitation, the Gospel, is so threatening to some religions and political ideologies.

One of the misconceptions among Christians is that the Gospel is welcome in this world. It's the conviction that if a church is not growing, it must be because we are not presenting the gospel rightly. If we just did a better job of clothing it with the right music and spinning it with creativity and humor, then people would find it attractive and the church would thrive. That's awfully convenient, especially from the perspective of the pews because it puts all the pressure and ownership on the preachers and the musicians and you guys are off scot free. But fundamentally, it's a misconception. Scripture never promises a warm reception to the Gospel. Instead, Jesus very simply said, "You will be hated because of me" (Mt. 10:22), and one of

the signs of the end times in Matthew 24 is “the love of many will grow cold” (v. 12). And in the parable, some servants were ignored. Others put to death.

In the parable, this treatment of his servants enrages the king. “He sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” Jesus is prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. when the Romans would finally lose patience and level the city.

But the King is still intent on filling the wedding hall. Now he says to his servants, “The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite as many as you find.” So they do. Quote, “They gathered all whom they found, both bad and good.” There’s no vetting, no background checks. They invite the derelicts and the disgraceful, the foreigners and the felons, the difficult and the disturbed, the undesirables and the unsuitables. But they also invite the noble and the nice, the polite and the proper, the modest and the mannerly. The bad and the good all thrown in together helter skelter, disparate people with only the King’s gracious invitation as the common denominator. Those walking into the wedding hall sort of look like those walking up the ramp into Noah’s ark . . . everything imaginable going in. Those mingling within sort of look like those mingling in our Fellowship Hall. Those at table together celebrating the feast sort of look like those at table together celebrating this feast.

Not one of them can say they deserve to be there. They are invited regardless of who they are or what they’ve done, what they’ve accomplished. It’s not their feast. It is the King’s feast for his Son. “See, *I* have prepared *my* dinner, *my* oxen, *my* fat calves, everything is ready.” We didn’t make it ready. God made it ready. We didn’t die on the cross. Jesus did. We cannot invite ourselves to the White House for a state dinner. Even less so can we crash the wedding feast for the King’s Son. But he has invited us.

It’s been said there will be three surprises in heaven. First, those who are not there. Second, those who *are* there. Third, the fact that you will be there. Regardless of

everything you know about yourself, you will not be excluded. You will be welcomed. That's grace.

Two years ago Pauline Bailey and Paul Carty were making plans to get married in the UK. They set their sights on the exclusive five-star Stoke Park Hotel. For less than thirty guests, the meal alone was going to cost over \$16,000. Pauline and Paul could afford it and wanted to write out a check as a deposit on their big day. For whatever reason, the hotel seemed in no hurry to accept their deposit. Then Pauline received an email from the wedding coordinator at the hotel. It said, "I am trying to put this wedding off as I don't think they are the type of people that we would want to have at Stoke Park." The bride to be wasn't supposed to receive that email. The wedding coordinator intended to send it to her manager.

Pauline and Paul were shattered, confused, enraged. They felt like they had been marked as undesirables and were wondering why. In disbelief she asked, "Isn't my money as good as that of anyone else?" Apparently, her money was just as good, but in the eyes of the hotel management, she and her fiancé were not.

Compare Stoke Park Hotel to that of the King's invitation to the wedding feast. Stoke Park wants only the very best, the crème de la crème to use their facilities, while the Lord has invited everyone, even the dregs of society.

Stoke Park costs an enormous amount of money for just a few people, while, because of the blood of Jesus, the doors of heaven are open to all, without cost.

The facilities of Stoke Park can be reserved for a day or two, but just try to come back and act like you own the place and you'll be promptly thrown out. Heaven is your home, where you are known and loved, the place where you belong, for an eternity.

Stoke Park keeps people waiting and wondering if they've been accepted, while Jesus says, "Truly I tell you whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged. He has crossed over from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

Stoke Park isn't as historic as it thinks it is, and won't be around as long as it thinks it will. The lights in heaven will never be turned off.

Stoke Park is so soaked in prestige and exclusivity that it is not a welcoming place, even to well-heeled, willing customers! But notice the warm hospitality of the King: "See, I have prepared my dinner . . . everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!"

Exclusive hotels and country clubs, exclusive universities and neighborhoods, exclusive cliques and circles, none of them are as classy as they think they are. And God is far more gracious than we could ever imagine. Amen.

