

Who will be in the Kingdom of God? That's more or less the question that prompts our Gospel reading for this morning. Interestingly, our Lord chooses to answer that question with a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, and in so doing applies it both to that specific time and to people of every time and place. Christ has strong words in this parable, both of warning, but also of comfort, concerning those who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God.

It begins, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many." A man is giving a great feast, an occasion of joy and celebration for all who would come. Now, such a thing required a lot of work and a great expense. You couldn't just run down to the store and get what you needed; you had to spend a lot of time finding supplies, preparing food, arranging musicians, and all in the days before any sort of "instant" communication. Your invitations went out at the speed of whoever was carrying them. So this giving a banquet and inviting many was a lengthy ordeal.

Despite how "inconvenient" this might seem to us today, there were advantages to this slower pace. One was that it gave people time to prepare. Once you received the invitation, you had plenty of time to clear your schedule and make other arrangements for whatever business you might have. With this time, you'd be able to make sure that you could attend this wonderful event.

Finally, all the work is finished, and the messengers are sent out again: "Come, for everything is now ready!" Wonderful news! And what is the response of these people who have been graciously invited, who don't have to bring anything because it's all prepared, who have had plenty of time to put this on their calendars? "I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused." "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused." "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." Everybody – everybody – has an excuse.

Now, how does the master take these excuses? He gets angry. Why? A number of reasons. First, the excuses are all pretty lame. As we heard before, the people invited had plenty of time to clear their schedules. And now they picked today where they have to go see their fields and examine their oxen? The field isn't going anywhere. You already bought the oxen. You could easily find different days on which to do these things.

And the excuse about getting married? Either you're using your wife as an excuse – which she isn't going to appreciate, already being referred to as "the old ball-and-chain" – or you've married a woman who is purposefully keeping you from feasts, and why on earth would you do that?

In addition to the excuses themselves being pretty bad, there also is the issue of using such poor excuses to refuse the generosity and hard work of the host. And we get this on a very human level. If you send out a last minute invite to go grab lunch, and the person replies that they already made plans, sorry, you don't get too bent out of shape about it. But if you invite someone to something important

and give plenty of lead time – maybe think RSVPing to a wedding – and they bail at the last minute with a poor excuse, you get a little upset.

It would also be different if the excuses had been serious. If a guest had replied that he had broken his leg and was unable to travel, or that his daughter had become very ill and he was having to care for her, or that a storm had collapsed part of his house and he was having to rebuild it, then we'd imagine that the host wouldn't be upset. If anything, he might send condolences himself.

But by offering weak excuses at the last minute, these people are essentially insulting the host. Not only are they disregarding all the time, money, and effort that he has put into this feast, but there's something very personal about refusing an invitation in such a way. Through their refusal, these people have despised not only the feast but the host himself. That's why he gets angry.

How do we apply this part of the parable? There are two ways, one historically, the other to people of every age. Historically, Jesus is speaking this to the Jews, specifically those upstanding, "righteous" ones. He's telling this over dinner at a Pharisee's house, which would've included other Pharisees, scribes, and experts in the Law as guests. These are the guys who know the Scriptures like the back of their hand. In that sense, they have invitation to the feast, and have for generations. They have known and studied and even taught the Law and the Prophets, which were absolutely full of the promises of the coming Messiah.

But now that the Messiah is here, what do nearly all of them do? They make excuses why Jesus can't be the Messiah, why the Kingdom of God can't be present, even though Jesus clearly teaches that it is. "He heals on the Sabbath; He can't be the Messiah." "He eats with tax collectors and sinners; I'm not going to follow Him." "He says He's the bread from heaven; who does He think He is?"

Even though the Old Testament foretold all these things, even though Jesus was fulfilling the Scriptures perfectly, these particular Jews come up with a lot of poor excuses and terrible Biblical interpretation to refuse Jesus' invitation to believe in Him. And in refusing Jesus, they refuse the Father who sent Him, provoking Him to anger.

In addition to this historical interpretation, this part of the parable applies to people of every day, including us. We are often tempted to think like the man whose comment began the whole thing: "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God." He's seeing the Kingdom of God as something far off, in the future. But Jesus teaches just a few chapters earlier in Luke that, in Him, the Kingdom of God has come near, that it is at hand. Where Jesus is, there is the Kingdom. Jesus has promised to be with His people through what we call the Means of Grace, the Word and the Sacrament.

Is He everywhere as God? Yes. But He has not promised to be everywhere to bless His people. No, He has promised to speak to us and increase our faith through His Word. He has promised to re-conceive us as His children in Holy Baptism. He has promised to feed us with His body and blood in His Supper.

Can you worship God anywhere? Yes! Of course you can! But the point of gathering together as believers isn't to worship God, it's to receive His gifts. Worship is just a natural response to such a great thing! Being a Christian isn't about what you do for Jesus; it's about what Jesus does for you.

As such, how do we respond to the invitation of our Lord, that invitation given to us in Baptism, reminded in Confirmation, and present every Sunday morning? Remember, this invitation isn't new. It came to you when the Holy Spirit first gave you faith, so, for as long as you've been a Christian. And Christians have been gathering together on Sunday ever since the Apostles gathered together that first Easter Sunday. Are we like those first guests, giving all sorts of weak excuses why we can't make it to the feast God has prepared for us? Do we let the things of this world distract us? Do we allow others to pull us away, or use them as an excuse to stay away?

Now, this doesn't mean that there aren't valid excuses. If you're sick or physically unable to make it to church, then that's fine, just like it would be for a dinner invitation. If you have to work to put food on the table, this warning isn't for you. If you are having to go help someone in urgent need – like pulling your donkey or your son out of a well on the Sabbath – then please, go help them, and don't worry. There are valid reasons for not going to church.

The thing is, though, I can't list them all for you, and point out every single instance when it's valid or not. What I can do is point to God's word, and remind you what it says. I can remind you that the Son of God gave Himself over to crucifixion and the wrath of God so that you might receive the gifts that are offered here. To put it a little more simply, Jesus died so that you could go to church. I would also remind you of how the Bible describes the Holy Spirit's activity in the heart of Christians, how His love causes us to desire to keep His word and be in His presence, receiving His gifts.

The real question, then, is this: What is the attitude of your heart toward going to church? Is it something that you know is important and desire to do, and honestly regret when you are unable to? Or is it something that you look for reasons to avoid, or ask what is the minimum effort that can be put in and still be okay?

This is part of Luther's genius in the Small Catechism. When he is explaining what the Third Commandment means, he doesn't say anything about being sure that you're in a pew for at least one hour once a week. Instead, he draws together the teaching of the Bible and says, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."

Is God's word – read, taught, in the Sacraments – something that we despise and look down on, or something that we see as holy, something that we gladly desire to have the opportunity to experience? If you answer these questions in light of the Bible and in an honest heart, you'll get your answer concerning when it's "okay" to miss church.

But what if you're worried that you're not good enough, or that you don't deserve to be in the presence of God Himself? Jesus addresses that, giving comfort in the second part of this parable. When the initial group refuse to come to the banquet, what does the master do? He says to His servant, "Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame." He doesn't throw a fit and decide that, if his guests won't come, then no one can come. The opposite, in fact! He so desires to share this wonderful feast that he's prepared that he sends his

servants to go gather everyone they can find. Even the poor and the crippled and blind and lame, people you'd never expect to be in such a great feast, are all brought in.

But even this isn't enough! The servant reports back: "Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room." What does the master say? "Well, some is better than none, so good enough."? No! He says, "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled!" If there's room, then go get more! He doesn't care that these people don't have an invitation, or if they even know who He is. His servants can explain it to them on the way in. His house will be filled! His feast will be eaten!

This part, like the first, has an historical and a timeless meaning. When the self-righteous Jews refused to come in, who did Jesus bring in? He went to the tax collectors and sinners. He called lepers and men blind from birth. He went to all those Jews who were considered "unworthy" by the upper crust and called them to repent and believe in Him.

And come in they did, even becoming some of His most devoted followers! St. Peter – uneducated fisherman. St. Matthew – former tax collector. St. Mary Magdalene – at one time possessed by seven demons. Even St. Paul – blasphemer and persecutor. All brought in to the Kingdom of God.

But did it end with just those Jews? No! There was still room! So Jesus sent His servants, His disciples outside the city, to the highways and hedges – into all the world, to the ends of the earth. The Gentiles would also be gathered in. They would be compelled, compelled by the truth that they had been in darkness but now the Lord of all had sent His Son to save them as well. The Gentiles would be baptized with the one Baptism, taught the one Word, brought into the one holy Christian Church. The Father's house will be full!

Still today the Lord is bringing people into His house, desiring to give the incredible gifts won for them and for all by the cross of Jesus. He sends out His word throughout the world, calling all to come and receive His blessings. He calls to us, inviting us to His house, over and over again, always delighting to be our gracious host.

Are we ever good enough to deserve such an invitation? Not at all! But He brings us in anyway! He knows we are soiled with sin, and He washes those sins away. He knows we have nothing to bring to such a feast, and so He provides more than we could possibly ask for. He knows we have ignored His call at times in the past, but He calls to us anew, to lay aside our sins and follow Him once more.

Our guilt may be great, but the grace of God is greater. For the sake of Jesus, the Father sends the Holy Spirit to bring us, to compel us, into His house. He desires His house to be full, and He desires you – each and every one of you – to be in it with Him!

The world is full of temptations that would pull us away from God's gifts. But they will all pass away. The goodness of God, though, will last forever. What awaits in paradise – the banquet of the

Almighty – goes beyond our imaginations, and because He loves you, the Lord Himself has invited you to be there.

In the name of Jesus, amen.