

The Second Sunday after Michaelmas (Trinity 20)
St. Matthew 22:1-14: "When Being among the Few Is a Blessing"
October 7/8, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, who prepared all things for our salvation, You called us to the marriage feast of Your dear Son, the Bridegroom of our souls; we humbly ask You, cleanse and direct our hearts, that we may not reject Your gracious invitation, but willingly follow Your Word and, being clothed by faith with the garment of righteousness, obtain eternal life with all Your elect; through the same Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 168)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the twenty-second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. / "Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' / "But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. / "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. / "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. / "Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who brought us solitary sinners into the great fellowship of the Holy Christian Church, and the Communion of Saints, dear fellow redeemed:

If you walked into an opposing team's stadium wearing your hometown gear, if you were a Democrat living in a Republican area or a Republican living in a Democrat area, if you were a teacher assigned to a classroom of twenty rowdy preschoolers, you would agree that "there is strength in numbers." As confident as we are when on the side of strength, we can feel quite overmatched when on the side of the few. We like to have a lot of allies. We don't like to be singled out. Staying on the side of strength is also safer. Being part of a big crowd probably

means you won't have to take the lead. You can let others do that while lending your support. And if you are attacked in some way, you have a whole bunch of friends to back you up.

On the other side, the small group is much more vulnerable. Its members are more easily intimidated. Their voices can be ignored or drowned out. They worry about whether they are thinking and doing the right thing. After all, how could so many oppose something that is beneficial and good? They wonder if it is even worth it to take a stand, since no one will listen to them anyway.

I

But while it is easier and safer to be on the side of strength, it is not always best. The majority is not always right. There are examples of this throughout history. At the time of Noah, most people had fallen away from God. The LORD saw that *"every intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil continually"* (Gen. 6:5). The only exception was Noah and his family; they trusted God's Word. Human sinfulness was just as evident after the Flood. Ten generations after Noah, the LORD called Abram away from idol worship to become the father of a new nation in the land of Canaan.

Then followed Isaac and Jacob, and the chosen people of God expanded. God helped them conquer the Promised Land. But growth in numbers did not lead to growth in faithfulness. The people turned to the false gods of the nations around them (Jud. 2:11), and *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (17:6). God sent a series of judges and then kings to lead His people in the right way, but they continued to fall away from Him. When the Prophet Elijah came on the scene, he lamented that he was the only person left who followed the LORD. The LORD replied that there were 7,000 others besides Elijah who had not bowed down to Baal (1Ki. 19:18).

The pattern we see in reviewing Old Testament history is that God's people rarely seem to have an advantage in numbers. When they do, they typically let their power go to their heads and fall in with the unbelievers. It appears that the Church of believers is strongest when it faces overwhelming odds. Think about the apostles preaching the truth about Jesus in the very city where He was killed. The message took root in people's hearts, and they were baptized in God's name. But as the church grew, it was weakened by the attacks of false teachers. Those attacks only intensified when Christianity was given legal status in the Roman Empire. The larger the church grew, the more it was torn apart.

The same is true today. Christianity has reached around the world. There are probably Christians in every country. But look how divided the church is! Why does this happen? It happens because of the devil's wicked deeds. As he once incited Adam and Eve to rebel against God and His Word, so he incites sinners against Christ, and Christian against Christian. The Lutheran hymnwriter Philip Melancthon expresses this sad reality, *"The foul old dragon and dread foe / With envy, hate, and wrath doth glow; / It always is his aim and pride / Thy Christian people to divide"* (ELH 545, v. 4).

Jesus says that the devil is like an enemy who comes during the night and sows weeds among the wheat (Mt. 13:38-39). The weeds grow up right alongside the wheat and make it difficult for them to remain healthy plants. The weeds may even grow within the visible Christian church. This is obvious to us. There are many who call themselves Christian who clearly are not

Christian at all. They might teach that Jesus was nothing more than a noble teacher, or that God is pleased with those who disobey His Commandments. Other cases are not so obvious. Some appear to be good Christians but are actually hypocrites. Jesus promises that these will be sorted out on the last day and thrown *"into the fiery furnace"* (13:50).

Statistically, Christianity is the largest religion in the world. But how many who call themselves Christian actually believe in Jesus alone as their Savior? Only God knows that answer, but without a doubt, the Holy Christian Church is not as large as it seems.

II

We know what role the devil plays in this, but the fault lies not just with Satan. The fault of unbelief rests in our own wicked hearts. It is not God's fault that so many reject His will and His Word. What more should He do? He created the world perfectly and handed it over to mankind to manage. But they decided to listen to a deceitful snake, and chose to love themselves instead of God. The LORD did not cast them eternally from His presence, which He would have been justified in doing. He gave them hope in a Savior, who would be born of a woman and would crush the devil's head (Gen. 3:15).

The LORD kept that promise. The Messiah was conceived in Mary's womb, and God became Man. Jesus healed and blessed and taught, committing no sin against anyone. But His gracious presence was not welcome. Jew and Gentile rose up and condemned Him to die by crucifixion. They abused and mocked Him. In return, He forgave them. He willingly died to win life for the wicked. Then He rose again and appeared to hundreds, so they and all people would know that the victory over sin, death, and devil was won for them. After this, He sent out the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of sinners through the Gospel. And He continued to strengthen and bless them through the Sacraments He established. What more does God need to do that He has not done?

And yet the typical response to these gifts is indifference. The king's wedding feast is ready, and the invitations are sent out, but no one seems to care. *"[O]ne [goes off] to his farm, another to his business."* Some even react violently to the message of God's Word. They treat God's servants shamefully and want them to be dead. This was true of the Israelites before the time of Christ, who persecuted the LORD's prophets, and it is still the case today. This spirit of indifference is also true of us who consider ourselves serious Christians. We do not often get out of bed eager to fill our hearts and minds with God's Word and do His will. And when God invites us to feast on His Word and Sacraments, it is easy to come up with other things to do that seem more pressing and important.

Like a person stepping on crumbling rock to get a good look over a cliff, we do not recognize how easy it is to fall from the faith. Jesus warns us, *"For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few"* (Mt. 7:13-14). So many deviate from the narrow path to heaven and join the great crowd marching to hell. How can you be sure that you aren't one of them? How do you know if you are among the few that are both called and chosen?

Well, let me ask you a few questions:

- Are you saved because of the righteous things you have done, or because Jesus lived a holy life for you?
- Are you forgiven because you atoned for your sins, or because Jesus shed His blood and died for you?
- Will you rise again from the dead because you deserve it, or because Jesus won the victory over death for you?

If your answer to every question is Jesus, then you are among the chosen. You are the elect of God. Because *“those whom he predestined—elected according to His grace—he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified”* (Rom. 8:30). God chose you from eternity to believe in Him, and He called you to that faith through the Gospel. He made you His own and cleansed your sinful heart in holy baptism, and He continues to strengthen your faith through the preaching of His Word and the Sacrament of His body and blood.

Why has He done this for you? It is not because you deserved it, or because you are better than others. This is what is so perplexing to our rational minds. We cannot explain why it is that we believe while others do not. By nature, we are just as troubled as anyone else, just as sinful, just as hostile to God. But God has been gracious to us. He chose us to *“be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness”* (Second Article of the Creed). He called us to His wedding feast, clothes us in rich garments, and has us sit down at the feast while He serves us!

There is strength in numbers, but strength and numbers are not everything. There are times **When Being among the Few Is a Blessing**. We thank God that He has redeemed us from the destruction we deserved and brought us into His little flock. And we pray that He keeps us steadfast in His Word and faithful to the end, as we enjoy His good gifts here and anticipate the great wedding feast in His eternal kingdom.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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