

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“COME TO THE BANQUET”  
Matthew 22:1-14  
October 12, 2008  
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Banquets and feasts are prominent in the Bible. There were, of course, wedding banquets mentioned, as well as royal banquets thrown by the King. Birthday banquets are mentioned in Genesis 40:20 and Matthew 14:6. These were sometimes prolonged affairs, and often attended with revelry and excess.

There is evidence that Jesus loved attending banquets and feasts. His first miracle was performed at such an event, the turning of water into wine. In fact, he was criticized, as you will remember, as a lover of parties and as a friend to those who frequented these events (Matthew 11:19). So it is only natural that, in his preaching and teaching, Jesus would occasionally use the imagery of the banquet.

Today's scripture begins: ***“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.”*** The king, says Jesus, sent out invitations for the wedding banquet and then he sent his servants to those whom had been invited to personally tell them to come. Quite unexpectedly, those invited refused the invitation. Then the king sent some more servants and said, ***“Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.”*** But those who had been invited paid no attention to the invitation. One went to his field; another to his business. Then, to add injury to insult, the rest of those invited seized the king's servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed his once-invited guests and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ***“The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the***

***banquet anyone you find.***” So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Quite an interesting story--much like last week's story. Many people were invited to the banquet. But those invited--those elite few who were on the king's list--refused to come. So the king's servants went out to the highways and byways and brought in anyone they could find - both the good and the bad.

**This is a parable about grace.** It tells us that you do not have to be among the elite in society to belong to the kingdom of God. God accepts you and loves you just as you are.

This invitation is meant for all of us; the good, the bad and the ugly. The homeless, the malnourished, the riff-raff off of the highways and byways are invited after the elite turned their back on the King's invitations. This is what grace is all about.

Christ reaches out to us all--the good and the bad, the young and the old, the wealthy and the homeless--all of us, and he says to us, ***“Come to the banquet.”***

Grace--God's unmerited love for people like you and me. You can't buy it. You can't earn it. You can't think your way to it, or pray your way to it, or even serve your way to it. It is a gift, freely given. You don't deserve it, no matter how virtuous you've been. And you can experience it, regardless of how bad you've been. Amazing grace--God's unmerited, totally free, absolutely no-strings-attached love for all people, sinner and saint alike.

During a conference on world religions held in Great Britain, some of the greatest theologians in the world began a friendly debate as to what belief--if any--in the Christian faith made it unique from the other religions of the world.

The debate soon grew heated as possibilities were considered and eliminated. Could it be the Incarnation? No, there were other religions that had gods who took on the form of a human. Could it be the Resurrection? No, there were some religions in the world that held claim to accounts of a return from death.

Eventually writer C. S. Lewis entered the room to see what the commotion was about, and when he heard the topic up for debate, he nonchalantly responded, **“Oh, that’s easy! It’s grace.”**<sup>(1)</sup> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!

This is the center of our faith as Christians. A man dies on a cross for a world that does not deserve it. A father runs down a driveway and welcomes home a wayward son. A silly sheep wanders from the rest of the flock. The shepherd does not wait for it to find its way home. The shepherd searches for the sheep and when he finds it, he takes it upon his own shoulders and returns it, safe, to the flock. A woman has been caught in adultery and the super-religious are beginning to stone her to death--after all, this is what the law prescribes--but there is a man there who intervenes, and tells her to repent of her sins and sends her on her way with no condemnation to be a new person. Friends, we are that wayward son, we are that silly sheep, we are that adulterous woman. We are the good and the bad brought in off the highways and the byways. If you do not understand that, you do not understand the Gospel.

**The people who are left out of the banquet are those who feel entitled to it.** Let’s just wrap our minds around that important truth for a moment. Privilege is an amazing concept. We begin to feel we deserve what we have not earned. Even the right to vote has come to us at a cost. Citizenship involves responsibility, in both the earthly and heavenly kingdom.

People who feel they deserve God’s grace invariably look down on others. They start dividing people into acceptable and unacceptable. They begin acting exactly like the people who Jesus said would be left out of the banquet. And sadly for them, they have loads of pride, but almost no joy. Joy comes from knowing that all we are, all we ever hope to be, is a gift from a loving and merciful God. Joy comes from knowing that even though we did not deserve it, God gave His only Son to die in our behalf. Come to the banquet. Come just as you are. The King invites you, regardless of your past or even your present.

**This brings us to one last thing to be said, and it too is important: God isn’t finished with us yet.** The story is not completed. Jesus tells how the servants went out into the highways and the byways and brought in the

good and the bad. So, the people who did not deserve it are gathered at the banquet. Then he adds this little ending:

When the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. **“Friend,”** he asked, **“how did you get in here without wedding clothes?”** The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ***“Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are invited, but few are chosen.”***

Do you have your wedding clothes? You are here at the banquet. You’ve been invited by the King’s servants. The table is set. But, do you have the right clothes?

Isaiah the prophet once wrote these amazing words: Consider, ***“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isaiah 61:10).*** We need to understand that grace provides the invitation; obedience to God provides the wedding garments.

This is grace, but it’s no cheap grace. We have been invited to the banquet. We are feeding on the sustenance that the Lord has provided. But how shall we be when we leave this place? Shall we not leave this place with grateful hearts? Shall we not leave this place with joyful hearts? Shall we not, then, leave this place with loving hearts? We have been loved with an everlasting love. Now we go out to share God’s love with our family, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers. God is not finished with us yet. God is in the process of making us a new people, a people who have within us the mind of Christ. Whereas once upon a time we lived only for ourselves, now we shall live for God and for others. Whereas life was meaningless and drab, now we go out seeing the beauty of God in the face of everyone we meet. God has something more for us. God has a life guided by God’s own Spirit. Just look into the face of Michael and you will see God.

A museum in Italy has on display four partially finished sculptures, unfinished works Michelangelo originally intended for use on the tomb of Pope Julius. Midway through the project he decided not to use them, so he

ceased working on them. There is a hand protruding out of one granite block, a torso of a man emerging from another, a leg in a third, and part of a head on the fourth, but none are finished.

Michelangelo called these unfinished works “**The Captives**” and he wrote, “**When I looked at those partial figures, they stirred up in me a deep longing to be completed--an ache to be set free from that which distorts and disguises, imprisons and inhibits my humanness, my wholeness. But as with those statues, I cannot liberate myself. For that I need the hand of another.**” <sup>(5)</sup>

We cannot put on the wedding garment ourselves. We, too, need the hand of another. God is not finished with us yet. God has invited us to His table. He offers us a wedding garment; a garment of peace, love and joy as we seek to serve God in the world outside. Won’t you take the gift God offers? Come to the banquet. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

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1. Daily Grace Devotional Reflections to Nourish Your Soul (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 2005), p. 9.  
2. John H. Stevens, “His Liberating Touch,” Discipleship Journal (July/August 1984.)