

➤ *This is the day (verse 1)*

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Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus to worship in this virtual way we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We don't do this in a rote and unthinking way but mindfully, as a way of offering respect and appreciation for their hospitality.

Call to Worship

*In the darkest valley, at the banquet table –
in the hard work of life, at the moments of ease –
in our day-to-day reality, at times set aside – like this time, now...
for worship, for listening, for paying attention –
with every step we take:
goodness and mercy follow us – our cups overflow.*

† Prayer

Holy God, the mystery of your presence stretches far beyond us, yet we know you draw near to us in Christ – walking beside us – guiding us with wisdom – loving us with boundless grace. Your Spirit encourages us as and gives us the energy and insight we need to follow and serve you. Holy God, we are glad to gather in your presence – to be embraced by your mystery and mercy.

Most gracious God, who gives the fruits of the earth for the benefit of all your creatures, we give thanks to you for abundant harvests and plentiful food. We pray for those in this land who are denied these gifts, and we seek your forgiveness for our complicity in their want.

We pray for those whose voices are not heard and for those who do not hear. Forgive us when our choices are selfish ones and forgive us especially when we do not choose to raise our own voice against the pain of those among us who suffer needless want.

Forgive us, God of mystery and mercy – amend who we are and direct who you would have us be for the sake of Christ, our Saviour and Friend.

Be with us always in Spirit as we boldly pray in Jesus' name... *Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen*

Words of Hope

Friends, the good news is that God knows us and loves us. We are forgiven – loved – and set free to start again. Thanks be to God!

† Litany of Praise **Psalm 23**

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;

We believe in the goodness of God.

We believe God hears and responds to our needs.

We believe God responds to all children everywhere.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.

We are grateful that we've been blessed with enough water.

But we know that many do not have enough.

Not enough water, not enough food, not enough peace.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Too many children do not see God's righteousness.

Too many children watch violence, taste hunger, feel fear.

Too many children cry from the unspeakable horror of war.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

To become involved is risky. Pain is often contagious.

Our hearts may be broken, and our lives may be threatened.

Yet we hear God calling and we can no longer hide.

Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of my enemies;

thou annointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Our steps may be small and timid.

We may read a book, write a letter, or make a gift.

But each tiny step is blessed by God and multiplies.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

God is more relentless than war.

God is more pervasive than hatred.

God is more insistent than despair.

Amen

Scripture **Matthew 22:1-14**

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, saying, *'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'* But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, *'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'*

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, *'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'* And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the attendants, *'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* For many are called, but few are chosen."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

Steve and I have not received many invitations lately. No dinner parties or games nights – no anniversary celebrations or birthday festivities – no evenings on the town or gala events. I don't think we should take this personally – it is the COVID-19 reality that we stick to home and hearth and limit our interactions to those in our inner circle – but it got me thinking about those events I have been invited to in the past. By far the most significant of those invitations are the ones for weddings – most memorably the weddings of my siblings.

I was a bride's maid in my oldest brother, Mike's wedding. The full-length strappy dress was a lovely shade of mauve and it was snug, but it still hangs in a closet downstairs! For Jerry's, I wore a bright floral dress with a sunflower yellow jacket that had big shoulder pads – all the rage at the time and oh so gaudy in my remembering. For Mary's wedding I made a beautiful dress from a piece of Chinese silk my parents had bought for me on a recent trip. I only wore that dress once as I was at my thinnest ever and just found out I was pregnant with Tristan. The dress never fit again! When Anne was married, I wore a black and gold dress with a jacket in a tapestry print of gold and purple that I bought in Edmonton. And my sister Mary arrived from Vancouver wearing a dress of a different style that was made of the exact same fabric – the photos are great!

I remember getting the invitations to those weddings and sending out the invitations for my own. So special. I would not have considered for a moment not attending – nothing seemed more important than participating in those celebrations – being part of the banquet – honoring the commitments being made. And for each of these wonderful events I chose my wardrobe – my wedding dress – with care.

There are seventeen parables in the gospel of Matthew and if I had to choose the most difficult to interpret this week's *Parable of the Wedding Banquet* would definitely be a contender! The story is full of violence and it switches gears in the middle before ending with a cryptic proverb.

To me these narrative twists sound like the outrageous things Jesus said and did. Rome didn't execute Jesus for telling feel good stories so perhaps we shouldn't be shocked by a parable that shocks. His stories are always intended to upset conventional expectations – about God, religion, politics, vocation, status, class – you name it.

In the passage from Matthew today an invitation to a wedding is sent out – a royal wedding – a big deal – and people are too busy, not interested, hostile. It is hard to imagine. Who in their right mind would refuse such an imperial invitation? And later, when the hall is filled with others who do attend, there is a mini parable (let's call it *The Parable of the Poorly Dressed Guest*) inserted about someone who comes to the wedding inappropriately clad – having given no thought to how they were dressed – not caring.

It all ends in catastrophe – a shocking story that ends badly – twice.

There once was a sovereign who prepared a extravagant banquet for a royal wedding. After the elaborate preparations were made, the invitations were sent out. Some people rejected the ruler's invitation – refused to come – paid no attention – killed the monarch's messengers.

The people on the A-list refused this prodigal generosity. They spurned an invitation to the most prestigious party in town. It's hard to believe, and it doesn't make any sense, but some people refuse royal generosity so after a second round of messengers, a B-list of guests accept the sovereign's invitation. If the privileged people refused generosity, then it would be extended to all the people that could be found – good and bad.

We might think at this point that things will all turn out okay but unfortunately one guest stood out like a sore thumb. This person wasn't dressed for the party at all – clad in COVID work-at-home duds perhaps or muck out the horse stalls attire – at a royal wedding! What was this person thinking?! How could anyone be so cavalier?

The first part describes the rejection of an invitation and the last part an expulsion due to disrespect.

You need a bit of background to really get to the heart of the first part. We are catching a glimpse of an intense family feud here. Matthew (the gospel writer) and his community (who lived 75 to 100 years after the death of Jesus) are caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah – especially about whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah the prophets had promised. This is not a Jewish-Christian dispute – but more accurately represents the pain of a community broken within its family and trying to justify itself. At this point in the family conflict, Matthew is willing to say that God not only rejects those who reject Jesus but actually sent the Romans to destroy the Temple as punishment. Tragically this parable has been used across the centuries – and still by some Christians today – to drive a wedge between Jews and Christians – to justify Christian mistreatment of Jews. That is not only a dangerous interpretation, it is one that is not helpful to us.

While it may have been understandable in the context of Matthew's small community struggling to make sense of its feels of alienation and abandonment, we need to think carefully about how we read this passage today precisely because of the dark history of its interpretation.

Everyone without exception has received a free invitation to the kingdom of God. It's a banquet of excess and extravagance. But some people refuse God's generosity. What do we think about what happens to those who refuse and reject the grace of God? Do we, like Matthew, think that they are destroyed by a violent tyrant? Do we condemn those who believe differently or profess no belief at all? I don't think we do. I don't think we should.

We are not Matthew's community – we are not the minority tradition with little cultural power trying to make sense of our rejection and alienation. We are disciples of Jesus who hear – even in this parable – the good news that God invites all – good and bad – because God is a God of expansive love and radical inclusiveness. We are disciples who see – especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – what is at stake here. It is the free invitation of grace – to sit at the divine table of grace – to hear God's words of love and forgiveness which are more powerful than any words of punishment, hate, or fear.

The party is, in the end, God's party and everyone there is there by grace alone. You had to be clothed with grace to be there and no matter what you may think of the wedding garment of grace when it is handed to you, you either put it on or risk getting pitched out. There is no other way to be at the party. Those who think they got there some other way or who think they can do without the clothing of grace everyone else is wearing will soon find out how wrong they are.

Hopefully, we accept the invitation – recognize it for the gift that it is – and allow ourselves to be moved by it so that we dress appropriately for the occasion. Think of the lack of the wedding garment in the second part of the passage as trying to enter the kingdom of God on your own terms – any old way – with no thought to the import of what you are committing yourself to. You can receive these glorious riches by grace alone but if you look at what is offered and find

it less interesting than other things that are occupying your heart and mind and life – you haven't given it due care. God's generosity is free for all, but it doesn't come cheap. It asks us for everything – our whole self.

Colossians 3: 12 – 15 gives us insight regarding how to dress for the wedding banquet that God invites us to be part of – how to clothe ourselves in the generous grace of God. May it be so... *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.*

➤ *You are called to tell the story* (tune: Regent Square) 583

† Prayer

God of our hearts and our hopes, as the season continues to change and harvests are gathered, we thank you for the beauty around us – for brilliant colours, birds flying south, the crackle of fallen leaves, and the rhythms of this time of year. We are grateful for your steadfast love amid so much that changes. This autumn, we also face unpredictable changes as the pandemic continues. Draw close to those who find the uncertainty unsettling and help us preserve our connection to you and to each other.

God of our imaginations and insights, we thank you for all the ways you inspire human minds to create things which improve the lives of your people. We are grateful for all the medical efforts taken to manage COVID-19, and for the scientists testing vaccines. Give them perseverance and success. Guide politicians and policy makers so that breakthroughs and resources are shared with the most vulnerable.

God of neighbours and neighbourhoods, we praise you for everyone working to build and maintain healthy communities: for teachers and librarians, healthcare workers, coaches, construction workers, farmers and labourers, store clerks and wait staff. So many have had their workplaces changed and their livelihoods threatened by the pandemic. Give them perseverance and encouragement. Make us good neighbours to all who serve our community and remind us to say thank you.

God of creature and creation, we pray for your world and the people with whom we share it...

- for those caught up in war or violent conflict
- for farmers struggling to adapt to the changing climate
- for the millions in our world who are starving
- for the millions who are chronically hungry
- for greater action on our part to feed the hungry
- for those who harden their hearts against the poor

- for all who work to eliminate world hunger
- for all our neighbours, both known and unknown to us.

God of comfort and compassion, we pray for all who are struggling this fall, whatever the reason. We remember before you...

- those facing illness or waiting for treatment
- those who have lost income and worry about winter expenses and shelter
- those who are grieving the loss of someone close
- and those whose mental health is under pressure these days.

Pour out your Spirit O God and unite us as one human family. Fix our hearts and minds on what is true and honourable and right, as we search for better ways to serve your people and work together. Keep us faithful to the call we have received in Christ Jesus, our Lord, extending your loving invitation to the world around us. In Jesus' name. Amen

➤ *When the poor ones*

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† Offering and Prayer

Giver of life and love, we thank you that in the heavenly banquet of your word you invigorate and renew us. May we boldly use your gifts to continue your work in the world. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Blessing

As you have been loved – love. As you have been welcomed – welcome. As you have been fed – feed. As you have received – give. And may the boundless love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit embrace you always. Amen

➤ *We will go out with joy*

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¹ Prayers and Litany taken and adapted from the PCC Worship Planner and Canadian Foodgrains Bank resources for World Food Day.