

21st Sunday After Pentecost
October 8 & 9, 2005
Sermon

For the 1st readers of St Matthew's Gospel the most calamitous year in living memory was the year we call 70: the year that the Romans destroyed the Temple. For nearly 5 years the province of Judea had been in open revolt against Rome, believing that God would save them because they were fighting for their faith. In 70 the walls literally came tumbling down. Jerusalem was utterly defeated. The Romans burned the city and tore the Temple to pieces. The Jews & Christians were left to ponder this. For many the question was, "Why would God allow such a thing?" For many others, it seemed a clear judgment of God that Jerusalem was evil. St Matthew's Gospel quite obviously is of the latter opinion. He tells us of a wedding feast, and that the ones invited—a metaphor for the religious elite of Judea—were arrogant, enamored of their own authority, insolent and scornful towards God. That is why they were destroyed, at least according to Matthew.

The problem is that if we have a God who only doles out judgment based on our performance we're all in serious trouble. Whether we think that we can do better than God or whether we meekly accept the affronts and abuses of others as an attempt to win salvation, we are arrogant. We trust ourselves to do what only God can do. If God simply doles out punishment then we are all guilty and none of us are getting into God's party. Martin Luther writes in the *Small Catechism*, "we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead, we ask that

God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed earn only punishment.” We need God to fix the problem for us.

Thank God that God does precisely that. The notion of a great feast at the end of time antedates St Matthew. The great poem from Isaiah 25 sings of such a banquet. It held in the midst of God’s coronation, God’s inauguration, as Ruler of the Cosmos. Death is swallowed up forever—yes I would wager that even the death of those who rejected the invitation is swallowed up—and all people are united with God. It is perhaps the most stirring image of the resurrection in all of scripture, and its promise of the endless good that awaits us in God is something to which each of us can cling, but what are we to do when the Temple is torn down, when evil runs amok around us, and that time after time just seems to be put off, time after time? Well, we’re here, and our worship liturgy centers on Word and Meal—we’ve even labeled them in the service booklet. It’s not the great meal; it’s not the end of time. Think of it as appetizers. We come to this little feast to get a taste of the great feast. The taste is real and its power in us is real.

Friends of Christ, we are Christ’s body, and in the sacrament of Holy Communion Christ’s body is given for us. We partake of Holy Communion, our Holy Appetizers, and Christ unites with us. “It is,” as Martin Luther says, “as if Christ were saying, ‘I will be the first to give himself for you. I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you....’” We remain sinners after baptism. Evil, the lures of the world, and even our own guilty consciences torment us every day, but in these Holy Appetizers Christ comes into us and

begins renewing us. The end has not yet come, but we get the appetizers of God's Victory Banquet. We eat the bread and drink the wine, Christ's body and blood, and make them part of us. There is no deeper union for us in this world than the union of food with the one who is fed. Food provides the raw materials of which we are made. The body and blood of Christ become a part of us and feed us, making us in the image of Christ, and tiding us over as Holy Appetizers until the great feast and the End of Time.

Our union with the Body of Christ means more, though. *We* are the Body of Christ; we are gathered, like grains of wheat, and made into one bread, one body of Christ. I'm united with each of you in a fundamental way, and each of you is united with everyone else here, and in the whole church as it was, is, and has yet to become. We *eat* of the body of which we all are a part, and in doing that we bond to our brothers and sisters in faith as food bonds to our body. We experience one another's joys and sorrows as our own. That's why, for example, we celebrate the birth of a child or remember the struggles of the sick *as a congregation*. The good and ill of our brothers and sisters in faith are ours.

I think that perhaps this explains, at least for our purposes, the most memorable and troubling part of today's Gospel story: the person who is not dressed for the wedding feast and who gets thrown out into the outer darkness. He's not living as though the blessings are real. Luther writes, "The sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he or she is made one with all others." It's not that this guy's not in a tuxedo; it's

that he's not letting the Holy Spirit shape him in Christ's image and join him to all the saints in Christ. The Holy Spirit works through each of us, but when we fight her we consume the Holy Appetizers but store them, clogging the arteries of Christ's body. We become that unprepared man.

With Holy Appetizers God joins to us and becomes the driving force in our lives, loving and forgiving us and loving and forgiving others through us. In the parable the Ruler sends his slaves into the highway, or literally The Way Out, the road that cuts out of town and into the country, the path that starts here at the altar and shoots straight out the doors into the world. Our lives as Christians happen mostly outside of the doors of the church, on The Way Out, where nourished by these Holy Appetizers we live as Christ's workers in full mystical union with Christ's Body. Let these Holy Appetizers work love in us, that we might grow in love and communion with each other, and live every minute of every day as Christ, loving and forgiving all. The victory banquet is coming. Right now, it's a smaller feast—a foretaste—and Holy Appetizers are on the menu. So enough! Let's get this party started. Amen