

THE FEAST OF HEAVEN

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 6, 2017
Based on Matthew 22:1-13; Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 19:6-9***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

It is commonly thought that in heaven you will be able to see loved ones who have gone before. That idea is in fact well grounded in the Scriptures, because one of the central aspects of the Biblical picture of heaven is that it is a community of people in fellowship with one another. Of course, last week I told a story about a Scottish woman who wanted to go to hell because she thought her family members would be there. We will come back to that idea; but it is important to note the kind of stress that Jesus gives to this promise that heaven will be not only fellowship with God but fellowship with other people.

We have observed in this series that because heaven is beyond our comprehension, the Bible uses images to help us to grasp something of the nature of heaven. It is notable that every image that the New Testament uses for heaven is an image of people in community together. There is the image of the heavenly city in the book of Revelation, which we considered a few weeks ago. Jesus gives us the image of many rooms in one house, or many sheep in one flock—again images of many individuals connecting together—and his most prominent image for heaven is likewise an image of joyous community: the image of the wedding feast.

The image of the feast as a prime image for heaven is rooted in the Old Testament. We heard a reading from Isaiah where the prophet had a vision of how God would open up the way into eternal life, and Isaiah said, “The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast . . . and He will destroy the covering that is over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces . . .” (Isaiah 25:6-8) The image of the covering or shroud or veil that is over all people indicates the division between humanity and God—how we so often cannot perceive God and are separated from God—and the veil may also be an image of mourning, symbolizing the grief of humanity as we wrestle with sin and brokenness and death. But the Lord, Isaiah says, will remove the veil and wipe away the tears and swallow up death forever. This of course is precisely what God does through Jesus Christ, as Christ reveals God’s love to us, takes away our sin through the cross, and triumphs over death. And the culmination of that victory is the feast—where people celebrate and enjoy great bounty together.

Jesus carries this feast image forward in multiple places in his teaching. He says, for example, “Many will come from east and west and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 8:11) Moreover, Jesus

carries the feast image to another level as in multiple places in his teaching he pictures heaven as a wedding feast.

We saw this in the parable we heard from Matthew, which was about a king putting on a marriage feast for his son. [*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son . . . Matthew 22:2*], and we see it in another parable where Jesus pictures ten maidens waiting to meet the bridegroom who is on his way to the marriage feast. [*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom . . . Those who were ready went in to the marriage feast Matthew 25:1,10*] Jesus also referred explicitly to himself as the “bridegroom,” when he was asked why his disciples did not fast, and he said, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?” (Mark 2:19) And John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the bridegroom, when he said, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom [referring to himself], who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.” (John 3:29) Finally, all this imagery of the bridegroom and bride and wedding feast comes to its culmination in the book of Revelation, in the passage we heard a few moments ago, which in its final vision of heaven declares, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [namely, Christ] has come.” (Revelation 19:6-7)

The image of the wedding feast pulls together the major themes we have discussed so far about heaven. We have noted that heaven is, above all, fellowship with God, a loving perpetual connection with God, and the image of a marriage is a prime picture of that kind of loving connection. In the Biblical picture, Christ is the bridegroom, and the church—meaning all believers—is the bride, entering into a sacred bond with the Lord. There is also, of course, the feast that accompanies the wedding, in which many people come together in joy. The image of the feast tells us clearly that heaven is a fellowship of people joining together, sharing with joy in the bounty of God’s grace. It is significant to recall that Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love others, and so it makes sense that these two elements are at the heart of what heaven is—sharing in love with God and with other people.

There are also, of course, invitations to the wedding, and notice how, in Jesus’ parable that we heard, he describes the invitation to the marriage feast going out to many. Some who are invited decline the invitation; as Jesus said, “They made light of it and went off, one to his farm and another to his business.” (Matthew 22:5) People today often make light of spiritual matters; God may be inviting them to His eternal Kingdom, but they focus their lives instead on earthly undertakings. Others respond with downright evil deeds; as Jesus said in the parable, “The rest seized the king’s servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.” (Matthew 22:6) This likely is an allusion to how people often treated the prophets shamefully, but of course we continue to have all sorts of shameful and violent

behavior today. Notice how *both* those who took the invitation lightly *and* those who responded in evil ended up not going to the banquet.

The invitation finally goes out to all, and it is significant that in the parable Jesus says that “the servants [of the king] gathered all whom they found, both bad and good, so that the wedding hall was filled with guests.” (Matthew 22:10) Here is a reference to how Jesus invites everyone—sinners along with “the good”—to come to God’s grace. But then in the parable there is an incident in which, as Jesus says, “the king saw a man there who had no wedding robe.” (Matthew 22:11) I referred to this part of the parable in an earlier sermon in this series where I noted how clothing in the Bible can be a symbol for one’s spiritual condition. A prime example is Isaiah 61, where the prophet says, “God clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.” (Isaiah 61:10) But in the parable, the man is lacking the proper garment; so the story continues, “The king commanded, ‘Bind this man hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there people will weep and gnash their teeth.’” (Matthew 22:13) Pretty rough treatment for showing up with the wrong clothes! But of course what is being symbolized here is that this man is in no spiritual condition to be able to stand in the feast of heaven in the presence of God. As the Psalmist said, “Sinners cannot stand in the assembly of the righteous.” (Psalm 1:5) The wedding robe represents, quite simply, how we need to be clothed in righteousness in order to be able to abide in God’s presence. Otherwise our sin separates us from God, such separation being symbolized in the outer darkness where people weep and gnash their teeth—which represents hell, our topic of last week. There is a clear message here that we cannot just waltz into the feast of heaven; we need a spiritual transformation that will cleanse us of our sin and that will dress us, so to speak, in a “robe of righteousness.”

Precisely such a transformation is brought about by Jesus Christ. It is highly significant that in the vision we heard from the book of Revelation, the Scripture says, “The Bride of the Lamb has made herself ready; it was granted to her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.” (Revelation 19:7-8) The Bride is the church—that is, all of us—and here then is a beautiful picture of how through faith in Christ we are given that “wedding robe”—we are forgiven and made bright and pure; we are clothed in righteousness, by the grace of Jesus Christ. So we are each invited to respond to God’s invitation and to receive the saving grace of Christ, so that we are reconciled with God, and we can know then that we are heading toward that great feast, where we will share with God and God’s people forever.

But what if you have loved ones who never answer the invitation? What about that Scottish woman’s concern, that her family was in hell? Is there any hope for that guy in the outer darkness? And what about people who never quite get the invitation of the gospel—who grow up in settings where they never really hear the message of Jesus in a way that

they can receive it. What about people in other religions? Can they be saved? We will pursue these questions next week.

But this morning, as we share in the sacrament of Communion, it is good to note that Communion is meant to be a kind of a foretaste of that feast of heaven. It is a sign of how we are all invited to come to Christ, to receive His saving grace, and to join in a community together—a real fellowship with one another that begins today and that will continue in God's love forever.