

SERMON OUTLINE

- I. The Invitation: Christ invites us to join Him at His Table.
- II. The Joy of Fellowship: As we approach the Table, we find that we are not the only guests; Jesus has invited many, and we share the joy of fellowship with all believers.
- III. The Stain of Sin: But it is not all joyous; our fellowship is marred by sin, and you may even doubt whether you should be a part of this community.
- IV. The Gift of Forgiveness: Christ offers us a gift by serving up His own body and blood for forgiveness, life, and salvation.
- V. The Now but Not Yet: We rejoice in this foretaste of the feast to come, knowing it is a mere shadow of the joyous fellowship we will share when Christ returns in glory.

OVERVIEW

Jesus invites us to join Him once again at the Table. He repeats the invitation again and again because He feeds us in order to build us up and strengthen our faith. His invitation draws us into a place where we have fellowship with all believers. And yet, our fellowship is stained by sin: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me, one who is eating with Me” (Mark 14:18). We are not asked to root out the offender, not commanded to judge one another. That is God’s task, not ours. Instead, Jesus gives us His own body and blood, and with it a promise: “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). His invitation to return is accompanied by His promise to make all things new, when once again we will share the fruit of the vine with Christ Himself.

SERMON

You arrive home one Tuesday afternoon after a long day at work. As you pull up to your house, you stop at the end of the driveway and step out of your car to check the mailbox. As you sort through the mail, you see the usual stuff: a couple of bills, a few credit card offers, a flyer for a sale at the furniture store down the street. You notice that a lawn-care service has placed a flyer in the mailbox without bothering to pay postage, and you roll your eyes at their disrespect for the whole system.

That’s when you spot it. Something different. Something special. An oversized envelope with a wax seal on the flap. Heavy paper with the address inscribed in flowing calligraphy. It is

stunningly beautiful, exuding luxury and prestige. There is no return address, but you can tell that this is a special invitation.

Without waiting to get in the house, you crack the seal and open the envelope. Inside is an engraved invitation to join the Queen of England for a grand banquet. Your travel arrangements have already been made. All expenses are covered, and you will travel first class. Before you can even consider what you have in the closet for such an event, you note that a gown, shoes, and accessories will be provided for you. You need only to show up.

When you call your boss to see if you can have a few days off, you're stunned to discover that your employer has already been notified and arrangements have been made to cover your responsibilities while you are away. Every detail has been attended to. A few hours later, you're on a plane winging your way across the Atlantic.

When you arrive, you are whisked to a luxurious suite, where you have a little bit of downtime to prepare for this amazing honor. You're a little unsure, but a quick check of the invitation confirms that yes, that is indeed your name and address, so it must actually be for you.

You shower and dress in the dazzling white gown that has been laid out in your room, and then you follow the instructions that were given, explaining where to find the table. As you enter the room, you are surprised to find that you are not the only guest. The hostess has invited many people, from all walks of life, and everyone gathers around the table to take their seats. Small conversations pop up as people get to know one another, and common interests are discovered. There is great joy in the banquet hall.

Everyone here admires the Queen and is overjoyed to be in her presence. The assembled group is full of kind, loving people, and all are made to feel that they are part of the group.

As the night goes on, though, arguments pop up here and there. One person is angry that his neighbor took so much of the gravy for his potatoes. Another pair begins to argue about whether the crystal in use is the best choice for such an event. Someone accidentally steps on another person's toes, and a yelling match ensues. One guy in the back has had a little too much wine and proceeds to try and belch the alphabet, much to the embarrassment of his tablemates. Another woman turns to her neighbor to point out someone who is using the wrong fork on the salad.

As you look around at the gathering, you may even begin to wonder if you belong here. The meal is so sumptuous, the environment is so luxurious. You doubt if this could possibly be meant

for you. What in the world could you have done to deserve such a gift? How could you ever repay such generosity?

Now that you've conjured up that whole scene in your mind, let's shift a few details and tie it in to our Gospel.

The invitation is not from the Queen of England; it is from someone far more important. The invitation you received is actually from the "Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God," the One "by whom all things were made" (Nicene Creed).

And the venue is not some ritzy palace in Great Britain; it is the sanctuary of this very church. The table is no mahogany beauty, but is the humble rail that stands before the altar. And the group of people who have been invited is, well, everyone around you—fellow members of this congregation but also visitors from other congregations and the whole sainted host of heaven and earth, who come together for this foretaste of the feast to come.

We gather together today in response to an invitation that Christ has extended: return to the Table; return to the fellowship that you are a part of as members of the Body of Christ; return to the joyous communion that we share with one another. In fact, Christ extends this invitation again and again, week after week, as He draws you to His Table to feed you and strengthen you and nourish your faith.

It is an exceedingly joyous feast, but it doesn't take long to recognize that it is also marred by sin. We are the chosen of God, but we also possess a sinful nature that infects everything. We sit at the Table with the same people who can't control their kids in worship. The man who smells a little funny. The woman who sings off-key. The friend who failed to keep your secret last month and betrayed you to a mutual acquaintance.

You may even wonder if you should really be here. At the Last Supper, Jesus revealed that one of His disciples would betray Him, and it rippled through the whole group. "Is it I?" each wondered in turn. "Am I that messed up that I would do something like that?"

You may wonder. You may doubt. But Christ has drawn you here, and He serves the banquet up all the same. He offers not just "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined" (Isaiah 25:6). No, it's much, much more than that. He offers you His own body and His own blood. He offers forgiveness of sins and life and salvation in this Holy Meal, as Luther explains in his explanation of the Sacrament in his Small Catechism: "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

This Meal takes away your faults. This Meal binds you more closely to your brothers and sisters in Christ and, more important, to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This Meal covers your sins, strengthens your faith, and nourishes your body to serve God and to serve your neighbors.

You belong here, because Christ has won your seat at the Table. Your Baptism is the personalized invitation, and Christ's death and resurrection is the wax seal that authenticates it. No one can claim that you do not belong, because your seat is guaranteed in Christ. He has promised it, and His promises are trustworthy and true.

We rejoice in all that Christ gives us in the Meal we will share. We give thanks for His grace that invites us to His Table, joins us in fellowship with one another, removes our sins, and strengthens and nourishes us for service.

And as amazing as this Meal is, never forget that this is merely a foretaste of what God has in store for you. This bit of bread and this sip of wine is just a teaser for the sumptuous feast we will one day share when all the saints of God come together for the wedding feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end. We live in this crazy "now but not yet." A time when we receive the benefits and the gifts that God has for us today, right now. But we also know that what we experience now cannot hold a candle to what will be on the Last Day. Today's gifts sustain us and build up our confidence in the feast to come.

May you rejoice in the gift of Holy Communion, which we share together today, and hold fast to the promise of the full feast to come.