

PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET
Matthew 22:1-14

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
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I remember one Sunday evening driving home from Pittsfield with some of our parishioners after Lenten Vespers. We passed an automobile racetrack, the name of which I do not know. There was a massive amount of spectators in the stands. The driver of our car commented, "What a shame that all of these people are here tonight, when they could have been in church with us."

When I was a young seminarian at Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, Fr. Kiprian, our amazing spiritual father and iconographer, showed me a drawing. The scene seemed to be sometime in the 1800's because of how the people in the drawing were attired. Nonetheless, its editorial message could refer to any time, even to our own day. The drawing depicted men and women nonchalantly, arm in arm, strolling on a bridge. The men wore spiffy top hats and elegant frock jackets; the women were dressed in beautiful frilly gowns and carried parasols. At the end of the bridge was the huge head of the devil, his mouth wide open. The strollers were oblivious to his presence, and they nonchalantly strolled into the very jaws of death and perdition. These two stories remind me of the lesson we are taught in the gospel today by the parable of the wedding banquet.

In Holy Scripture the kingdom of heaven is likened to a great banquet. The meaning of today's parable is twofold. The parable, first of all, illustrates the Lord sending His prophets to the people of Israel in order to invite them into His heavenly kingdom. Some reacted by making light of the Lord's invitation, and others ignored the Lord's invitation altogether, instead choosing to occupy their time with their businesses and worldly pursuits. And the rest treated the prophets, the servants of the Lord, shamefully, and killed them.

The second meaning of this parable concerns us. We celebrate the Holy Eucharist at the Divine Liturgy in the Church. When the clergy bring the Holy Gifts out and proclaim, "With the fear of God, and with faith and love draw near," the Lord is inviting everyone in Church to attend His heavenly banquet. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:53-54). This is a great gift bequeathed to mankind by our heavenly Father. Not even the angels in heaven can receive Holy Communion. This invitation extends to those who are not in Church as well. This invitation extends to all mankind. However, how will the rest of mankind receive this Divine invitation? How would those spectators who chose to watch racing cars have received the Divine invitation? And what about those naive and oblivious strollers on the bridge, who are strolling their way to perdition? Have they actually received the Divine invitation and deliberately chosen to ignore it? Have they decided to make light of it, ignoring the Gifts of God, and instead decided to stroll their lives away into perdition? Or perhaps they have not received the invitation and don't know what they are missing. Perhaps no one told them that there is something much greater and better waiting for them.

How many people know about the Orthodox Church? How many people know that it is the second largest Christian Church in the world? How many people know that Orthodoxy extends through history with the same faith and way of Christian living for two thousand years? How many people know that it is different from the type of Christianity that they may already know? How many people know that this is the Church for them and their families? All of us here in the Church have an apostolic mission, from priest to lay person, from man to woman. We are all tasked with the mission to tell people about us, about the Orthodox Church, and to help spread the word that everyone is welcome, and everyone is wanted. In line with the parable of today, *everyone* is invited. Will you help me to extend this sacred invitation on

behalf of our Lord? As Fr. Stephen Damick says, let them come and visit, and let them come and see. They won't be sorry that they did. Amen.



THE ETERNAL BANQUET