

SERMON - On the Parable of the Wedding Feast, Matt. 22:1-14, Sept. 2, 2018

The early Christians understood very well that an essential part of being a Christian was the necessity to gather on the Lord's day in the "ekklesia," the community of the church, and to participate in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In the Commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai, we are told to labor for six days, but the seventh day belongs to the Lord. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The Christians understood that if they did not keep the Lord's Day, then they could not even call themselves a Christian. Yahweh delivers the Hebrews from Egypt, not because they were working as slaves, but because Pharaoh would not let them keep the Sabbath and offer the sacrifice. Just like today if we do not participate on the Lord's Day in the sacrifice of the Eucharist, if the Hebrews did not offer the sacrifice on the Sabbath, they could not even call themselves a Jew. Making excuses is bad enough. "My son has a baseball game. My daughter has soccer. My son has basketball. We worked hard all week. We want to sleep in and just enjoy ourselves. Church is boring." And so today people stay home and refuse the invitation of the Father to come to the wedding feast. The friends of the father in the parable today even make light of it. They think that the invitation to come to the wedding feast is a joke. We neglect God's calling out of negligence, laziness, or out of coldness and hardness of heart. Or we do not come simply because of very weak faith and considering other things to be more essential for us and for our children than God.

St. Paul tells us that God must be the center of our lives. Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), in his sermon on the parable of the wedding feast, says the following: "Preparation for receiving Christ's Holy Mysteries is not simply a matter of reading prayers. We need to prepare for participation in the Lord's Table (Trapeza) our entire lives. St. Paul calls this 'having the mind of Christ.' "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Having this mind is the 'wedding garment' of which the parable speaks. The Lord calls each one of us, but we should not simply respond to this call and come to the wedding feast in just any old way. We need to spend our whole lives in fulfilling Christ's commandments, in good deeds, in prayer and repentance for Communion. We have no right to receive Christ's Holy Mysteries if we do not have that mind that was in Christ Jesus. It is Christ that is the image that we must follow. We do not have the right to approach Christ's Holy Mysteries if we carry a grudge against someone or if we ourselves have offended someone. The Lord says: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Every time that Sunday approaches, we should ask ourselves: do we approach God with peace of conscience and at peace with our neighbors? Are we ready to approach Christ's Holy Mysteries or not? Do we bear within ourselves the mind that was in Jesus Christ, that is, to what extent is our life an imitation of the life of Christ, God Incarnate? If we receive Christ's Holy Mysteries without having been reconciled with God, with ourselves, and with our neighbors, then the same thing can happen to us that happened to the man who came to the supper without a wedding garment. The king, seeing this man, said to his servants: 'Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 22:13).

Our eternal fate depends upon how we commune and how we approach God: will we be cast into "outer darkness," where there is 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' or will we be found worthy of the promised Heavenly Kingdom? Our fate is decided when we, having heard God's call, respond to it or not, and care for our "wedding garment" or not. And this call sounds unceasingly. Every minute, every hour, and every day of our lives we hear God's call, and at any given moment we make choices between good and evil, between God and the devil, between light and darkness – a choice upon which our future depends. Amen."

