

Luke 14.16-24  
Second Sunday after Trinity  
10 June 2018  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

The words to which we today turn our attention are those of the Gospel lesson, and especially these words: "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel them to enter."

*Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.*

How to misuse the word of God.

The year is A.D. 408. The place is North Africa, a fractious region of the Roman Empire. Two Christian parties contend against one another: the Catholics. Represented by St. Augustine. And the Donatists, who rally around their now-dead former Bishop Donatus.

The issue at stake? Well, not much from St. Augustine's perspective. During a grave persecution of Christians in the early 300s, some 100 years earlier, some of the Catholic bishops and priests, in great weakness and at sword point, had given away the Holy Book of Christianity, the Bible, to be burned by the pagan authorities. They repented of their weakness and desecration of the Holy Scriptures. The Catholic Church welcomed them back. But not Bishop Donatus. If they had betrayed their Lord by betraying the Scriptures they could never be Christians again. They had lapsed. And no repentance and no mercy could restore them.

And so there were two lively strains of Christianity alive and well in North Africa. The Donatists. A sort of early form of Puritanism. And the Holy Catholic Church, the bastion of orthodoxy. And neither would have anything to do with the other. And Augustine found the Donatists to be in schism—to have picked a fight over nothing.

And after decades of dealing with the Donatists, finally, Augustine, in an act of frustration, gave command to the Roman imperial forces: *cogite intrare*. Compel them to enter. Bring them bound to the altars of the Catholic Church. Stick the Eucharist in their mouth. And make them Catholics. Again.

And he felt he had his justification. From Scripture itself. For, after all, that's exactly what the Lord Jesus Himself commends the "certain man" in this parable for doing. When everyone had refused his invitation, he commanded his servant: "Go out to the highways and the byways and compel them to enter."

Augustine had missed the point; and at the same sword point by which earlier Catholic bishops had fallen, he compelled the obedience of the dissident Donatists.

And yet, there they stand, those words: "Compel them to enter." What are we to make of them?

Well, we talked about this last week. The inner meaning, the spiritual truth, must be read from outer meaning. That's generally true in the Gospel according to St. Luke. But it's *always* true in the parables. And the parable must be understood by its *intention*.

So the parable once again, very briefly: A certain man—we don't know what kind of man, but obviously wealthy enough to throw quite a shindig—has put on a party. He's let everyone he'd like to invite know about it. The party's coming up. And they've given a tentative RSVP of "Yes. We're coming." And then, when everything's set, he sends word to the "Yes, we're coming," to let them know. But invitee after invitee comes up with one excuse after another. I got a new car and I have to go test the brakes. I just got back from my honeymoon. Sorry, Charlie! Love to come, but we just inherited the back 40 out in the Flint Hills. I know it's not a prior conflict. But, boy, we'd love to spend the weekend out there.

But the meal's prepared. And it must be served. And so the command goes out to the servant: Go to the highways and byways. Take whoever's there. Poor or penniless. Blind or lame. Invite them.

And then there's still room. So the further command: compel them to enter.

And the intention of it all? To tell what the kingdom of God is like. The realm and not the people. The character of God, and not the character of the invitees.

And about that there's much to be said.

The meal prepared by the host is the holy Gospel of the full and free forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus Christ, God's own Son.

And what the parable is saying about that meal is this: *it is already there*, just waiting to be served up. And the Scriptures testify about this amply.

Christ is the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world. In eternity, God prepared this meal of the Gospel—to receive back to Himself sinners who through their own sin had separated themselves from God. And from the Fall until the very Last Day when the Lord Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, the invitation will continue to go out.

Church bells will ring, calling all to feast on this Gospel.

Parents will raise their children in the faith, in homes rich with home devotions.

Neighbors will tell neighbors the "excellencies of Him who called them out darkness into His marvelous light."

Missionaries will be sent to the four corners of the globe.

The Bible in Braille—as we'll celebrate next week—will be prepared for those whose darkness is not only spiritual but also physical.

Always calling everyone to the meal that has already been prepared.

To the meal that faith feasts itself upon.

To the promise of the Gospel. To the forgiveness of sins. To the justification of the sinner before God. To the sure hope of your own resurrection staked on the resurrection of Jesus. To the sure hope of eternal salvation, because the Savior

of the world has not only descended, but also ascended. It's already done. It's already been prepared. It's already there. For you. For the eating. In Holy Word and Blessed Sacrament.

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Now, you know when you prepare a fancy meal the last thing you want is for it to go to waste. I've you've ever over-estimated on your Christmas or Easter dinner, you know how it goes: it's leftovers until it's all gone. That and that alone. Because such food shouldn't be wasted.

Well, here, in the Gospel, is a meal, the most precious meal. A meal that didn't just cost a few lousy bucks at the meat counter at HyVee, but the holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of God's own Son. Fellow-redeemed: you have never eaten such an expensive meal as this one.

And here's the thing. The Giver and Preparer of the meal *never* wanted it for Himself. He wanted it for you. And it's those two things—its costliness and the fact that He wants to give and prepare for you—that compel Him. God will be relentless. The meal will be served. And in fact, He would serve it to you.

And so this gets us to our mysterious saying, "Compel them to enter." In the story, there's more food. The originally invited guests didn't want it. They had better things going on. Just like when the meal of the Gospel is being served and you find a million reasons not to come and get it. It's too hot out today. Or too cold. It's raining. Or sunny. It's a beautiful day out. Or a miserable one, and the house is nice and cozy. It's vacation time. It's not vacation time. I'm behind at work and stressed out. I'm ahead at work and want to enjoy it. You know what I'm talking about.

But God will not allow His precious Gospel to go to waste. So He sends out again. This time to those you'd least expect. To people who were raised outside the church. To those raised in the church but fell from it, to their great shame. And to people whom life has dealt the worst poker hand ever. To people ashamed of their own poverty, of the mess of their own life, of their own sins. To you.

Now, look at what happens in the parable. Some of those people heed the invitation. Outcasts, they take the stranger host up on his invitation. And they get a fantastic meal.

But even then, not everyone says yes. Some of the lame look at their crippled bodies in shame and cry out, "I don't belong there!" The blind look at the misery of their life. And this wonderful meal? It's too much for them. They, too, stay behind. The poor hold out their arms, look at the rags they're wearing, and say, "That's very nice, thank you. But I'm not dressed properly."

You know how that goes, don't you. Because that's the Old Adam doing what he does well. Justifying himself. Telling himself his own condition: he's just fine without the meal of the Gospel! And why? Because he has these rags of sin to wear. And the meal's, well, it's just too fancy: he's used to picking through the garbage cans of his own self-justification.

And now we're getting close to understanding this "compel them enter." You see what's going on here, don't you? Resistance. For the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are spiritually discerned.

And it's right then and there that the host utters those words: "Compel them to enter." And here we get a true picture of God's kingdom. Of God's rule. Of the way God wants to be and act and deal with *us*. In fact, of the way that God *must* be and act and deal with *us*.

Because if it were up to us? Why, we'd go right back to picking through the garbage of our self-justification. Right back to wearing the rags of our sin. Right back to the helpless lameness of our death in trespasses and sins.

But the meal must be served. Why? Because it's not for God. It's for you. It's a meal that forgives sins. And God doesn't have any sin to be forgiven. It's a meal that clothes you in the righteousness of Jesus in your Baptism. And God doesn't need that righteousness. It's a meal that feeds you the very food of heaven, the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, to give you eternal life. And God doesn't that food of heaven. He's already immortal.

But you do.

And so relentlessly, God will have His holy Word proclaimed. To shatter the hardness of your heart through His holy Law. And to give you a new one through His Gospel. To destroy the works of darkness that hold you in chains. To credit you with the works of light worked by His Son Jesus Christ. To strip you of the poverty, lameness, pennilessness of your sin. And to clothe you in the brilliant righteousness of Jesus.

And thanks be to God for it. For there's not a one of us here today, but that that hasn't happened to us; and there's not a one of us here today that that isn't happening to right now. Because you're sitting down to the meal right now and receiving the forgiveness of all your sins. Compelled to enter by the relentless grace and mercy of God the Father who sent His Son into the flesh to bear all your iniquities.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

*sdg*  
*jsb*