

Matthew 22.1-14  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
17 October 2021  
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.

Some of you may have heard of the little set of novellas called *The Hammer of God* by Swedish Lutheran Bishop Bo Giertz. If you haven't, look up this sermon online after church so you can get the reference in the manuscript and order it. *The Hammer of God* delivers a wealth of theological wisdom in a really delightful way.

One of the scenes in the book tells of a conversation between a newly arrived associate pastor by the name of Fridfeldt and an old senior pastor known as a rector. Fridfeldt is a sincere young man. Sincere, but terribly misdirected. He thinks that Christianity is the virtuous doing the virtuous. And he thinks that within the church it's only the virtuous—like him—who are true Christians. Okay, so we've got two guys: Fridfeldt and the rector. This is how the scene goes:

Fridfeldt seated himself on the sofa. He felt that he must not put off confessing where he stood. This strange old man [*the old senior pastor*] with his brandy and his soldiers should at least learn what kind of assistant he had gotten.

"I just want you to know from the beginning, sir, that I am a believer," he said. His voice was a bit harsh.

He saw a gleam in the old man's eyes which he could not quite interpret. Was approval indicated, or did he have something up his sleeve?

The rector put the lamp back on the table, puffed at his pipe, and looked at the young man a moment before he spoke.

"So you are a believer? I'm glad to hear that. What do you believe in?"

Fridfeldt stared dumbfounded at his superior. Was he jesting with him?

"But, sir, I am simply saying that I am a believer."

"Yes, I hear that, my boy. But what is it that you believe in?"

Fridfeldt was almost speechless.

"But don't you know, sir, what it means to be a believer?"

"That is a word which can stand for things that differ greatly, my boy. I ask only what it is that *you* believe in."

"In Jesus, of course," answered Fridfeldt, raising his voice. "I mean—I mean that I have given Him my heart."

The older man's face became suddenly as solemn as the grave.

"Do you consider *that* something to give Him?"

By this time, Fridfeldt was almost in tears.

"But sir, if you do not give your heart to Jesus, you cannot be saved."

“You are right, my boy. And it is just as true that, if you think you are saved because you give Jesus your heart, you will not be saved. You see, my boy,” he continued reassuringly, as he continued to look at the young pastor’s face, in which uncertainty and resentment were shown in a struggle for the upper hand, “it is *one thing* to choose Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior, to give him one’s heart and commit oneself to Him, and that He now accepts one into His little flock; it is a very different thing to believe on Him as a Redeemer of *sinners*, of whom one is chief. One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one’s heart to Him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks His walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is.”

Fridfeldt said nothing. Though it seemed sacrilegious to speak about the Savior in connection with such an ungodly thing as a walking stick, he saw that the old man’s intention was certainly not sacrilegious. He felt this by the very tone of his voice. When the old man continued, his voice was gentler still.

“And how you must understand that these two ways of believing are like two different religions, they have nothing whatever to do with each other.”

—Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, trans. Clifford Ansgar Nelson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), 146–148.

So how might we boil this all down? How about this? The Lord finds what is displeasing to Him and makes it pleasing. The Lord finds what is unlovely and makes it lovely to Him. The Lord finds what ought to be discarded and instead takes it home and makes it His prize possession and puts it in the living room on the mantle so He can admire it.

That’s the entire thrust of the Gospel for today. It’s as much about what the Lord is like as it is about what He saves is like.

You see, we find out just a couple verses before today’s Gospel that Jesus was telling these parables to the chief priests and the Pharisees. Just like Fridfeldt, they wanted to be and be thought of as religious. They wanted to be and be thought of as virtuous.

But look at what happens then. If you would be religious in your virtue and virtuous in your religion, there are no two ways about it. You want nothing to do with Jesus *as He is*—as a Redeemer. As a Redeemer of you, a sinner.

And so there are really two religions. Two churches. The church of Abel, who grasped God by His promise to save and rescue and redeem sinners in the Seed of the woman. And the church of Cain, who wanted to be religious in his virtue and virtuous in his religion.

And these two religions, these two churches, run right through all humanity. They might even run right through this congregation. You either present yourself before God in all your virtue—even if your virtue, like Fridfeldt’s, sounds as virtuous as giving your heart to Jesus—or you give up on yourself and your virtue and know there’s nothing left for you except a rescue.

That’s exactly what happens in the parable. God comes with His rescue. He sends out His invitation. He says, “Everything’s ready! The Lamb has been slain. The banquet’s been paid for in the blood of My dear Son!”

But the church of Cain—they hear that message. And yet, they want nothing to do with it. They’ve got their fields to plough; their businesses to manage. Which is to say, they have their virtue to cultivate.

Now here’s the horror of the thing. *They hear the message*. Just like you do. They hear that to have any truck with God, to have any piece of Jesus, to have any hope of eternal life—they hear that they must first be a sinner.

But—who knows why?—they look at their life, and it's pretty good. They haven't done anything really horrible. No murder. No adultery. No embezzlement. Lies, sure, but just white lies. And it's not like when they come to St. John's on Sunday morning they're bowing down before Ba'al or the Ashteroth.

And so when the pastor says, "I forgive you all your sins," when they sing, "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world," and when they hear, "For you, for the forgiveness of sins," it just rolls off the back like water off the back of a duck, because they're comforted by their virtue and not by the forgiveness of sins. Because rather than take to heart what God says they are—sinners—they're focused on the good they've done. And even on the good they're doing *right now*.

Now, it's surprising how it goes with this first set of invitees. We might expect the sort of nonchalance of ones who say, "Sorry. Gotta get back to my works."

But what of this violence? They took the emissaries of the king and didn't just blow off the invitation they extended; they bound them, beat them to a pulp, and killed them. Why?

Well, it's a fact. The church of Cain can't stand the church of Abel. That's its founding principle. The church of Cain can't stand it to hear that its best and most virtuous and most glorious is and must be sin *because it's a threat to the very existence of the church of Cain*.

The whole premise of the church of Cain is *my virtue, my goodness*. And the greatest heresy to be spoken in the church of Cain is that even my virtue and goodness is sin. And that heresy must be driven out. Driven to the margins. Silenced. By force, if necessary. And not in the name of evil, but in the name of virtue, so that all the categories get flipped. What's virtue in the church of Abel is wickedness in the church of Cain. And what's sin in the church of Abel is virtue in the church of Cain.

You see this all the time. The LGBTQ agenda labels the horrific violence done to the human psyche—I'm a boy, but I like boys—and body—I'm a girl, but I want to shrink and amputate my breasts—a virtue, and anyone who says different the greatest sinner. That's the church of Cain at work.

The church of Cain extolls the killing of babies in the womb as a virtue for the good of society, and labels anyone who disagrees as coldhearted and uncaring toward women. That's the church of Cain calling what the church of Abel calls wicked virtuous.

But never lose sight of what's actually happening. The church of Cain does all of that under the demonic inspiration of preventing people from seeing themselves as they are—sinners—and God as He is in Christ, a Redeemer from sin. But in the church of Abel the greatest virtue is being a sinner—because it's only there and then that God can and does do His virtuous work of saving.

And so, silenced they must be. It's what the church of Cain has done all along. Cain slew Abel. Jeremiah was thrown in stocks (Jer 22); Uriah struck down by the sword (Jer 26); and the prophets of God bound, beat-up, stoned, murdered (Matt 21; Neh 9). Don't think what you experience today to be an anomaly. It's not. It simply places you firmly in the church of Abel, which is always marked by suffering and the cross. By the persecution of the church of Cain.

And yet, sadly, the church of Cain doesn't know the might and power of God and so they have no fear of Him. The One whose choice and power it is to save or condemn, to kill or make alive, to bring down to Sheol or to raise up again—that is a fearsome God. For it can only be that only the God who can damn eternally can also forgive sins and give everlasting life. So the church of Cain whistles nonchalantly by the gracious face of God only to encounter all His wrath—the king, after all, sent his army and destroyed those wicked men.

And yet, that isn't how God wishes to be known. "No one has seen God before," John says at the start of his Gospel. "The only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, This One has made Him known." St. Paul says, "Who has known the mind of God to take counsel with Him? We have His mind—Christ." How does God wish to be known? Only through His Son. What is the mind He wishes to reveal? Only the merciful mind revealed in Christ. And where do we see that? "I have determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified," says St. Paul. To see and measure God aright is to know Him through Jesus; to see Jesus is to see what He thinks of you; and to know what He thinks of you, He points you to the cross—to the death of precious Son for you, on your behalf, in your place, for the forgiveness of your sins. That's God as He wishes to be known. And His knowledge will not be stymied by the violence of the church of Cain.

And so He sends out more emissaries. This time to the highways, to the main roads, which is to say, to wherever.

*And note to whom they go.* To the wicked and to the good. To the good. As we see them. To the wicked. As we see them. To sinners. As God sees them both. It's only those who aren't already in the banquet who need an invitation. Which is to say it's only sinners whom God makes saints.

And how do you know they're all sinners? Because they can't come in their own clothing. They have no virtue to wrap themselves in. Whatever their virtues are they're so transparent they're like a chiffon dress without lining or Saranwrap. Fact is, if they're going to be clothed in virtue they must be clothed in the virtue of Another. They must be clothed in Christ. They must put off the Old Man and put on the New Man, which is Christ. You don't go in the shame of your nakedness to the neighborhood picnic. You cover up in your clothes. Just so, you don't come before the omniscient throne of God naked in the shame of your sin; you come dressed in Christ through your Baptism.

Isn't that amazing! Even if the church of Cain wanted to come to the banquet—suppose all those people had said yes at first instead of running off to fields and businesses; suppose that after they had silenced the messengers of the church of Abel, they decided to come anyway. All dressed up in their see-through virtue. It would have still been shameful nakedness. It's not just the wicked who get a new wedding garment. It's even the wicked—as we see them. *And* the good—as we see them. But not as God sees them. For He sees them all as they are. Sinners who in their great shame need nothing more than to cover in the righteousness of Jesus their nakedness that shivers at the gaze of God.

But shockingly when the king walks into the banquet hall, there he is. Everyone else in their fancy wedding clothes, in the righteousness of Jesus. And this one guy, this one man, standing over at a pub table chatting away, sipping champaign ... buck naked. All his shame just hanging out there. Maybe it was the guy who went out to exercise his virtue in his field, got done early, and thought he'd check it out anyway. Maybe it was the man who'd gone to do his good works at his shop. It was a slow day. So he pulled down the security gate and sauntered off to the wedding party.

It doesn't matter. Just because he showed up didn't mean his attitude had changed. He was just like Fridfeldt. A virtuous man doing the virtuous thing in rewarding Jesus with himself. As if his presence were the best birthday present he could ever have given to the king, and not the other way around.

If he'd only known. If he'd only known that it's only that God who has the power to condemn eternally who also has the power to save eternally. But he was arrogant and without fear. And instead of being greeted by the merciful face of God in Christ, he was left to encounter nothing but God's smoldering wrath.

How much better to have been a wretched tin can, he must have thought, because then at least I may have seen the face of this strange Lord who had it in his power to do with me whatever He will. But who wanted nothing but to have *mercy on me*.

Amen.

*Oremus: Kyrie, miserere nobis. Christe, miserere nobis. Kyrie, miserere nobis. Amen.*

*pax dei, etc.*

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