

Apostles Anglican Church
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Larger On the Inside: Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast
(Isa 25:1-9, Ps 23, Phil 4:4-13, Matt 22:1-14)

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Turn to page 55 in the ACNA Catechism *To Be A Christian*, to the section “Concerning Sacraments,” and you find this question and answer:

121. What is a sacrament?

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. God gives us the sign as a means by which we receive that grace and as a tangible assurance that we do in fact receive it. (*Genesis 17:1-21; John 6:53-58; I Corinthians 10:16, 1662 Catechism*)

The Catechism goes on to define the two Sacraments of the Gospel that all Anglicans accept — Baptism and Holy Communion — and five others that are commonly accorded sacramental status and are often called Sacraments of the Church: confirmation, ordination, marriage, absolution, and anointing of the sick (*ibid*, p. 56).

All of these sacraments have a common characteristic, essential to the nature of a sacrament, and I would humbly suggest almost definitive of a sacrament:

A sacrament is something that, spiritually speaking, is larger on the inside than it is on the outside.

Something that is ordinary, mundane, and *small* on the outside opens up to reveal the vastness of God on the inside: that is sacramental. The most iconic example of this, perhaps, is the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, called the Theotokos (the God Bearer). As an ancient hymn proclaims:

From you, our God who is before eternity, became a child!

He has made your womb His throne, *making it more spacious than the heavens.*

In you, O woman full of grace, all creation exults!

A Jewish woman, herself appearing ordinary, mundane, *small* on the outside carries *within* her the Son of God incarnate, the one by whom, through whom, and for whom all things in heaven and on earth, seen and unseen, were made, her womb His throne, making it more spacious than the heavens.

A sacrament is something that, spiritually speaking, is larger on the inside than it is on the outside because it opens up onto God.

Whether there are two sacraments or seven or seventy times seven is not a thing I care to debate. For the one with eyes to see and ears to hear, the world is awash with sacraments. The flowers on our altar each week are sacramental: small things of earth that — with eyes to see — open up to reveal the God of beauty who delights in diversity and complexity and color and aroma, and who delights to delight us in these things. The music of hymn and chant and chorus and praise is sacramental: small, just twelve notes on five lines and four spaces — sometimes a bit above and below — lifting our voices and hearts and eyes and ears to heaven where we see God enthroned high and holy and hear the seraphim call one to another “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3)! A Bible is sacramental: apparently nothing but a small volume of ancient religious texts like many others the world over, but for us, the very Word of God, “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

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Let those with eyes see and those with ears hear.

Our texts today point toward another common feature of our lives — often ordinary, mundane, small — that can be, and should be, sacramental, that really is larger on the inside than it is on the outside, that opens up onto God: a feast, a banquet, a meal.

With the first hint of fall in the air, I allow myself to listen to the 1998 Windham Hill compilation album *Thanksgiving*; it will be my musical companion from now until the holiday itself. I sat in the park recently thinking of Thanksgivings past, particularly those of my childhood. Extended family gathered at my grandparents’ home next door, far too many people in far too little space. The dining room table itself, with leaves, filled the room and forced a certain familial intimacy. The table was always set with the silver used only twice a year and with the multi-colored, radioactive Fiestaware. Look it up if you’re under sixty. Food was abundant and rich and, well, everything Southern and bad for you and delicious. But this feast was more than a meal; it was larger on the inside than it was on the outside. It opened onto this great expanse of love. It opened onto God and his love for us, his bountiful care for us. It was sacramental, though I didn’t know the word or its meaning then.

I cherish those memories, even though they are also bittersweet. Most all of the people gathered at those feasts are gone now. I pray they are all with the Lord Jesus. The few that remain have scattered with time and distance. Though we don’t always realize it or acknowledge it if we do, there is a pall cast over every such feast, a veil, a covering spread there by the unwelcome, though not uninvited guest of death. You

don't think of this as a kid — deviled eggs and pie are on your mind — but the reality dawns as you get older.

But, if this feast is indeed sacramental, if it is indeed larger on the inside than it is on the outside, if it does open up onto God, then death cannot have the final word. Death may lurk in the corner of the dining room, but there is no place setting for death at the table. The prophet Isaiah saw a sacramental feast to come for Israel and for the world, saw it from the inside. He saw the glorious end, the telos, toward which this feast and every feast is meant to point. He wrote:

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

7 And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

8 He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Isa 25:6-9).

The time is coming, Isaiah says, the time is coming, St. Paul says, the time is breaking in even now, the cross and empty tomb say, when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, and when Death is swallowed up in victory (see 1 Cor 15:53-54). As we proclaim at the Eucharist, that Great Feast that lies at the intersection of heaven and earth, that heavenly feast that every holy human feast points toward sacramentally: By his resurrection he broke the bonds of death, trampling Hell and Satan under his feet (BCP 2019, p. 133). And, as we sing in the *Pascha Nostrum*:

Alleluia. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us;
therefore let us keep the feast,
Not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil,
but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Alleluia (BCP 2019, p. 16).

Therefore, let us keep the feast, the feast that is larger on the inside than it is on the outside, the feast that opens up onto God.

It wasn't Isaiah only: David, the great king and sweet psalmist of Israel, also envisioned a sacramental feast. It is there in his best known and most loved psalm, Psalm 23. This psalm mixes metaphors and images. It starts as a pastorate, with sheep and shepherd and with the provision that the LORD, as shepherd, makes for his

flock Israel: green pastures, still waters. But, then midway through the Psalm, we find ourselves walking in a dark, shadowy valley, stalked by death itself. Who are we at this point in the psalm? Are we still sheep? It is not perfectly clear, for the next image is that of a feast with us as honored guests. When sheep attend feasts it is typically on a serving platter and not seated as guests, so clearly a change of identity has taken place in the psalm.

“Thou preparest a table before me,” David writes, and the only “Thou” in the psalm is the LORD; we are the honored guests at the table of the Lord, a table He has prepared for us. But there is someone else in the room, too, lurking in the corner, not reclining at table: our enemies. Since the only enemy identified in this psalm is death, I must assume that death has somehow made it into the feast, not as guest but as interloper and that he has brought with him some of his compatriots, perhaps sin, perhaps hell. They crouch watching, waiting. And what do they see? They see us — you and me — seated at a place of honor and anointed with oil. And who in Israel were the anointed ones? Priests, prophets, and kings. With death looking on, the Lord — in the midst of the feast — catches us up into this great sacramental reality consecrating us as his priests, prophets, and kings, declaring that death no longer has dominion over us so that we can face death unafraid and proclaim:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever (BCP 2019, p. 295).

This feast, too, is larger on the inside than it is on the outside because it opens up onto the Lord, and because it opens up onto our consecration as his priests, prophets, and kings.

All of this — the sacramental nature of feasts, the vision of Isaiah of the removal of the pall of death, the psalm of David with the consecration of God’s people in the very presence of death and to the shame of death — all of this is in the background of Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast.

No feast is more sacramental than a wedding feast. Jesus makes that clear in his parable. While it is — on the outside — about a splendid table and an important festal gathering, on the inside it is about the kingdom of heaven. The wedding feast in the parable is larger on the inside than it is on the outside because it opens up onto God and his kingdom that is dawning in the person, in the life and ministry of Jesus.

You know the contours of the parable. A king gives a wedding feast for his son. Invitations were sent long ago, so the feast comes as no surprise to those who had been invited. And yet, when the king’s servants come to announce that the table is set and the festivities are about to begin, those invited refuse to come. Surely, there is some misunderstanding. The king sends other servants with a clear message: “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast” (Matt 22:4). Some still ignore the

invitation and go about their routine. Others, for reasons not explained in the parable, seize the servants, abuse them, kill them.

Let's pause the parable here briefly to consider the setting in which Jesus told it. We are in Holy Week and Jesus is in the temple having recently cleansed it of the money changers and merchants. He is likely teaching and healing when the chief priests and the elders of the people accost him: "With what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority" (Matt 21:23)? Rather than answering their question directly, Jesus gives them instead three related parables: the parable of the two sons, the parable of the tenants, and this culminating parable of the wedding feast. These parables have less to do with Jesus' authority to act and more to do with the leaders' and people's response to his actions. In each parable, those expected to respond favorably — to recognize the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven — do not, and those expected to continue about their business blind and deaf to what God is doing actually see and hear and embrace the good news.

Clearly, Jesus is telling the parables about those leaders who questioned his authority. Scripture says as much: When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet (Matt 21:45-46).

So, what is Jesus saying to the chief priests and the Pharisees that incites them against him? He is reminding them that the prophets — David and Isaiah and many others — have foretold the great sacramental banquet of God, prepared for all people, the banquet that swallows up death, the feast of their anointing as priests and prophets and kings in the very presence of death and to death's undying shame. And he is reminding them that their ancestors ignored the prophets, refused to come to the feast, abused and even killed the messengers that God had sent with his invitation. And now, Jesus warns, these very leaders that question Jesus' authority are repeating the sins of the fathers, ignoring God's wedding feast invitation and preparing to seize and kill the one who is not only the messenger sent with the invitation, but the very son of the king who has issued it. And what will come of their rejection of the invitation? Back to the parable now: The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city (Matt 22:7). Historically, that is precisely what happened when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple just forty years after Jesus spoke these parables.

But, the story continues. The king sends still other servants out to the main roads to invite all and sundry to the feast, both good and bad. That is you and me, by the way, and all those Jews and gentiles who will, throughout history, hear the Gospel and respond to it. So the wedding hall is filled with guests (Matt 22:10). You see, this feast is sacramental: it is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside because it opens up onto God. The Jewish leaders were certain that the banquet hall was small and that the guest list was limited to them and to those like them. When they began to catch a glimpse of the vast extent of the king's generosity, when they began to suspect the

sacramental nature of the wedding feast, they refused the invitation and chose death's banquet instead. And so death cast his pall over them. Death stalked them through the valley of the shadows and took them unawares. Their city was destroyed and they died in it.

That was and is a tragedy because it is still going on. The invitations are still going out. Some who should know better, who have every reason to know better, are ignoring them and abusing the servants who deliver the invitations. But there are also those with unlikely backgrounds in unlikely circumstances and places who make their way to the wedding feast. And, since it is larger on the inside than it is on the outside, there is always room for more.

I would like to stop here, and it would be safer to do so. But Jesus doesn't and so I can't with any integrity. When all the unlikely guests are gathered in to the feast, the king himself comes in:

11...and he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. 12 And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen (Matt 22:11b-14).

No wedding garment. Cast into outer darkness. Many called but few chosen. What are we to make of this? St. Gregory the Great offers this insight:

But since you have already come into the house of the marriage feast, our holy church, as a result of God's generosity, be careful, my friends, lest when the King enters he find fault with some aspect of your heart's clothing. We must consider what comes next with great fear in our hearts. But the king came in to look at the guests and saw there a person not clothed in a wedding garment. What do we think is meant by the wedding garment, dearly beloved? For if we say it is baptism or faith, is there anyone who has entered this marriage feast without them? A person is outside because he has not yet come to believe. What then must we understand by the wedding garment but love? That person enters the marriage feast, but without wearing a wedding garment, who is present in the holy church. He may have faith, but he does not have love. We are correct when we say that love is the wedding garment because this is what our Creator himself possessed when he came to the marriage feast to join the church to himself. Only God's love brought it about that his only begotten Son united the hearts of his chosen to himself. John says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for us (Forty Gospel Homilies 38.9).

We have been invited to this great, sacramental wedding feast of the kingdom of heaven where death is swallowed up in victory, where death is shamed through our anointing as priests, prophets and kings. We have been invited to this great,

sacramental wedding feast of the kingdom of heaven through no merit of our own, but through the grace, mercy, and love of the king. We dare not presume upon that grace, mercy, and love. We must clothe our hearts in the love that reflects the love he has for us. And so we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

And so, clothed in the wedding garment of love, let us come to the feast. **Amen.**