

who have to work on Sundays or might be travelling on the weekend or might have other vocational responsibilities. Just repent of the excuses. I know this sounds mean or harsh, but Jesus is so clear in our Gospel reading today. He wants those He invites at the banquet. His banquet needs to be the priority in our lives. And it's not because it's as if God is some law-monger who is happy only when we follow His law. He gives us laws because they are all for our good! And in the case of the invitation to the banquet – it's everything we need for both body and soul! It's a Gospel imperative! It's like when a parent tells their kids to eat their vegetables. Yes, it's a law, but we all know it's a law that is good for the body! How much more the things of God that are good for both body and soul! He says, "Take; eat" and "Take; drink" because He wants you to receive His body and blood, and believe it is for the forgiveness of sins!

We are all so good at making excuses, though. Any one of us can reason away anything we are charged to do. Just a few examples from this past year: "If the church puts out any restrictions, I'm not coming to Church." "Once I get the Covid vaccine, I'll be back in Church." "Once, the Government or CDC lifts its restrictions, I'll be back in Church." "I'll be back once I feel safe." I say this as lovingly as possible, but those are all excuses just like those in Luke 14. You're missing out on the banquet.

When **Hebrews 10:25** teaches, "**Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near**", it is specifically talking about gathering to worship together and receiving Christ's gifts. Just as our Divine Service starts off with Confession and Absolution, which is an immediate recalling of our Baptism, so also this section in **Hebrews 10** starts the same way. As we confess in the liturgy so also **v. 22** reads, "**Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**" We can draw near to God in confidence because God has given us a good conscience through the cleansing waters of Baptism. **1 Peter 3:21** in its entirety (I say this because I usually just teach the kids the shortened version), "**Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**" We can draw near in true faith because God has drawn us to Him through Baptism where our bodies were washed with pure water and the Word!

In this section of Hebrews 10, we have a clear allusion to Baptism, then a clear mandate to gather together as the body of Christ, and then immediately after, we have this strong admonition that would be best for you to hear word for word, **vv. 26-29**, "**For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?**" Setting aside God's Word, His laws and promises with our excuses ultimately profanes the blood of the covenant; a clear allusion to the banquet – the Lord's Supper. To use Jesus' words, the "**new covenant in [His] blood**" (**1 Cor 11:25**).

To make excuses is part of the sin of pride. Deep down, we know we are poor, miserable sinners, but man, that gets depressing after a while, so excuses often cover up the depth of our sin and at least gives the façade that we are better people than we really are. Pride is a most wicked tyrant. Look, we even have a month now called "pride month." Pride is such a power grabber that instead of just letting the sin of lust be celebrated, which is what "pride month" of course is actually about, pride has to hijack it for itself. The sin of pride deceives a person to declare *itself* right in the face of what God calls right! The sin of pride actually can cause people not to come to the banquet, too! "I've missed Church so long, now I can't go back or else it will look like I was in the wrong!" In this historic listing of the seven deadly sins, pride is always listed first. Pride is always the last sin before apostasy as Solomon teaches in **Proverbs 16:18**, "**Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.**"

Pride is always lurking. Thus, even those that do faithfully attend the banquet will suffer with the temptation of pride and other great shame and vice in one way or another. They will get impatient with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ for not attending. They will be tempted to think of themselves like the Pharisee who prayed in the temple, "**God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or**

even like this tax collector” (Lk 18:11). As Paul so timelessly admonishes us in **1 Corinthians 10:12, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”**

Repent. Whatever your sins: whether it’s making excuses for not coming to the banquet or impatience or pride or whatever – repent. And come to the banquet. Receive the forgiveness of sins. Like the father who having seen from afar his prodigal son returning home, **“had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Lk 15:1),** so also our heavenly Father rejoices when His children return to receive His good gifts. This is no competition over who is right or who is wrong. There’s no place for such pride here. As Jesus teaches, **“There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10).** If we as a Church or I as a Pastor fail to rejoice at just one sinner who repents, that miserable shortcoming of love falls on us.

So here’s why the Church must continue to preach and teach until Christ returns why we all need the banquet, that is, the feast of God’s Word and Sacraments as often as you can get it. Through the Means of Grace, God strengthens and sustains faith. To the person who makes excuses and skips out on the Banquet, no one is saying you aren’t a Christian... yet. I have no doubt that such a person might still have faith. That’s up to God anyways. But unfaithfulness is a slippery slope. Living in unrepentance is a slippery slope. A serial killer never becomes a serial killer who doesn’t first start off skinning cats or meddling in lesser evils. In comparison no faithful Christian ever becomes overnight an Apostate, which is the word that the Bible uses to describe those that fall away from the faith. Apostasy happens gradually – a slippery slope. **Hebrews 3:12, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away (ἀποστῆναι) from the living God.”** The Church must preach these things because the Church – specifically and personally I as your pastor – care so much that every single one of you goes to heaven and partakes of the eternal banquet with Christ! When someone’s external expression of faith or lack thereof is inconsistent with their internal confession of faith, I will always be concerned it will lead them away from our living God! I love you. I love you, which is why I am compelled to preach the hard things!

So how do we “take care” lest such falling away happens? We heed the call of our Good Shepherd. He tenderly invites us to the banquet. But it is not mere coming to it, or mere eating and drinking, but faith in these words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” For whoever believes these words has exactly what they say, “The forgiveness of sins.” And we know, we believe, teach, and confess that where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is eternal life and salvation. Thus by God’s grace He provides the very portion that keeps us from falling away; that keeps us steadfast in the one true faith until life everlasting; and that prepares us to receive the Final Banquet that is to come with great joy and full confidence! Let’s cast off the excuses and come to the banquet! In Jesus’ name, Amen.