

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 13, 2026

The Feast of Justice vs. The Palace of Silence

[Readings](#) [Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are confronted this morning with two radically different visions of table fellowship. Two very different invitations, two very different hosts, and two very different ideas about what happens when human beings gather around a banquet.

On the one hand, we have the breathtaking vision of Isaiah 25 and Psalm 23. The prophet Isaiah takes us to the heights of God's holy mountain, painting a picture of a feast prepared for *all peoples*. It is a banquet of rich food and well-aged wines, a table where the shroud of grief that hangs over all nations is destroyed, where death is swallowed up forever, where the Lord God gently reaches out to wipe away tears from every face, and where the disgrace of God's people is once and for all removed. Psalm 23 echoes this extravagant grace, declaring that the divine Shepherd prepares a table before us in the very presence of our enemies, anointing our heads with oil until our cups run over. This is the table of the Kin-dom; a place of total safety, radical belonging, and unmerited grace.

But then we turn to Matthew 22, and we are plunged into a deeply unsettling parable. Jesus tells a story about a king who prepares a wedding banquet for his son. When the invited guests refuse to attend, the king's response is swift and brutal; he sends his troops, destroys those murderers, and burns their city to the ground. Then, after dragging in anyone from the main streets the king walks through the hall, spots a man not wearing a wedding garment, and confronts him. When the man is speechless, the king orders his attendants: *"Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

For centuries, well-meaning Christians have tried to smooth over this parable, insisting that the violent, vengeful king in Matthew 22 must be a stand-in for God.

But as theologians of the cross, our calling is to follow Martin Luther's famous maxim that a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil, but a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

This violent king is *not* God. Matthew 22 is not a picture of the heavenly kingdom; if anything, it is a mirror held up to human empire. It is a parabolic unmasking of how worldly institutions, elite systems, and imperial rulers manage their tables. Worldly power offers invitations that are always conditional. Imperial banquets demand absolute compliance. They require you to wear a mandatory uniform of silence, to play along with the host's ego, and to pretend that everything in the palace is pristine. And the moment you disrupt that illusion, the moment you bring your unvarnished truth, your grief, or your protest into the room, the system moves with terrifying speed to bind you hand and foot, to cover up the mess, and to cast you into the outer darkness of isolation and exile.

God's table on the mountain is a sanctuary of radical safety and justice. The palace table in Matthew 22 is a site of forced conformity and enforced silence. And the question the Gospel puts to us this morning is simple, which table are we going to serve?

Calling a thing what it actually is means we cannot keep our theology safely tucked away in the clouds. We cannot read about God wiping away tears on a holy mountain while ignoring the violent, bitter tears being shed on college campuses and street corners across our nation this week.

If we want to understand how the palace banquet operates in our modern world, we need look no further than the horrifying news surrounding the Cornell University; the systemic gang rape of a young woman at Cornell involving members of an elite fraternity.

Let me be completely clear and unreserved from this pulpit; sexual violence, gang rape, and the assault of any human being are unspeakable evils. They represent the ultimate, catastrophic failure of human righteousness. And remaining silent in the face of such an attack is also a failure of human righteousness.

In my preaching, I have frequently warned against the soul-crushing process of "*thingification*," the demonic mechanism under capitalism and patriarchal culture where real human beings, real bodies, and real image-bearers of God are stripped of

their sacred dignity and reduced to mere objects. Objects to be used, consumed, dominated, and discarded for someone else's pleasure or status. What happened at Cornell University is the violent, logical conclusion of a culture that treats human flesh as disposable. Especially, if we're naming hard truths, female presenting human flesh.

But the tragedy does not stop with the violence itself; it extends to how our elite institutions react when the violence is exposed. In his commentary on the Book of Acts, theologian Willie James Jennings describes the self-protecting nature of violent systems in words that should haunt us today. Jennings writes that when systems of power are threatened, they become "closed circles of violence, relying on the inner coherence of their logic. Their authority confirms their argument, their argument justifies their actions, and their actions reinforce the appropriateness of their authority. Violence, in order to be smooth, elegant, and seemingly natural, needs people who are closed circles."¹

That is precisely how elite fraternities, university administrations, and institutional systems operate when scandal breaks! They circle the wagons. They worry about brand protection, donor retention, and legal liability. They enforce a "wedding garment" of mandatory silence, pressuring victims and witnesses to stay quiet so that the palace banquet can continue without interruption. They bind the wounded, push them to the margins, and protect the abusers to preserve the status quo.

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul offers an uncompromising alternative to this institutional cover-up. Paul writes, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Do not let the world twist those words into a call for polite, superficial positivity! Paul is not telling us to ignore evil and think happy thoughts. In the context of Roman occupation, thinking about whatever is true, honorable, and just means demanding truth over propaganda! It means declaring that there is nothing pure about institutional silence. There is nothing honorable about protecting predators.

¹ Jennings, Willie James. Acts. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017. Print. Belief; A Theological Commentary on the Bible.

There is nothing commendable about sacrificing a young woman's body on the altar of a university's reputation. True purity is not image-management; true purity is dragging violence out of the shadows, naming it for the sin that it is, standing unconditionally with the survivor, and demanding full accountability.

Before we go any further into these texts, I want to invite us to move this theology from our heads down into our bodies. In an empire that conditions us to accept closed circles of violence, we must physically unlearn institutional compliance. I invite you into a brief exercise right here in the sanctuary.

Wherever you are sitting, I invite you to uncross your legs, rest your hands gently in your lap, and if you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes or lower your gaze to the floor. Take a deep, slow breath in... and let it out.

I want you to bring to mind a time in your life when you felt forced to wear a mask. A time when you were carrying a deep wound, an experience of harm, a terrible fear, or a painful truth; and you knew that the room you were in demanded your silence. Think of a table, perhaps a family dinner, a workplace meeting, a social circle, or even a church room, where you knew that if you spoke your unvarnished truth, if you showed your real scars, you would be judged, silenced, or pushed out. Feel the tightness in your shoulders. Feel the constriction in your throat. Feel the sheer, exhausting weight of having to pretend everything was "fine" just to be allowed to stay in the room.

Hold that feeling for a moment... and now, take another deep breath, and let that room dissolve.

Now I want to invite you to step out of that room...that palace and step onto the mountain of Isaiah 25. Sit down at the table Psalm 23 describes, a table prepared right in the presence of everything that threatens you. Feel the Shepherd standing as an unbreakable shield between you and those who would do you harm. Look up, and see the face of God leaned in close.

God is not checking your credentials. God is not examining your clothes. God looks at you with unfailing, compassionate love, gently reaches out a hand to wipe the tears from your eyes, removes every drop of your shame, and whispers to your heart: "Your body is holy. Your truth is heard. You don't have to pretend here. You

are safe, and you belong.” Take one more deep breath... and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Which one of these experiences felt like Gospel good news to you? Which one do you think God wants for you? Which one does God want for your neighbor? If the violent king in Matthew 22 demands a “wedding garment” of institutional compliance, what is the true garment that God calls us to put on? The true garment of the Kin-dom is *hesed*...steadfast loyal self-giving love. It is what the early church father St. Basil described in the fourth century when he wrote: “The bread which you hoard belongs to the hungry; the coat which you preserve in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; the shoes rotting in your possession belong to the shoeless.”

Putting on the garment of Christ means walking the Way of Emmanuel, God-with-us. But that little word “with” carries Emmanuel’s sharp grace, a holy presence that refuses neutrality. If God is with the survivor of sexual assault, then God is actively against the rape culture that enabled the assault. If God is with the targeted, the unhoused, and the oppressed, then God stands against the doors that shut them out.

The Holy Spirit always moves us in the direction of tears. Following Jesus means placing our actual physical bodies, our financial resources, our social reputations, and our institutional power close to someone else’s struggle. It means refusing to let any human being be treated as disposable.

We return to the magnificent promise of Isaiah 25:8: “The Lord God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” The palaces of this world (with their closed circles of violence, their institutional cover-ups, and their demands for silent compliance) do not get the final word. Caesar does not get the final word. The perpetrators of violence do not get the final word. The ultimate reality of the universe is a God who tears down the walls of exclusion, breaks the chains of trauma, and prepares a table where every survivor is honored and every tear is dried.

Followers of the Way of Christ are called to be barrier-breakers. We are called to reclaim the keys of the Kin-dom, not to lock doors or enforce purity tests, but to unbind those whom the world has shackled in shame and fear. So walk out of these

doors today committed to the truth. Reject the lie of “*thingification*.” Believe survivors when they speak. Speak out against casual misogyny, locker-room entitlement, and institutional silence wherever you encounter them; in your workplaces, in your schools, in your families, and in your politics.

Put on the true garment of Christ; a love that has a backbone, a love that always moves in the direction of tears, a love that acknowledges the victim’s pain, a love that demands accountability, and a love that builds longer tables so that everyone has a place. Go be human. Be humanity. Be righteous. Be who God created you to be. Amen.