

October 11, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 32:1–14

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:1–14

“Beyond the Threshold”

When I was a student in Korea, students studied very hard. In high school, I arrived at school around seven in the morning and often stayed until ten at night. And most of that time was spent studying. If you were especially diligent—or maybe especially determined—you might stay until eleven. There was even a common saying that studying was “a battle of sitting.” In other words, if you could stay in your chair longer than everyone else, maybe you would have a better chance of succeeding.

For many teenagers, so much of life seemed to depend on one question: What college will I get into? For years, we studied with that one goal in front of us. And sometimes it almost felt as though once we got into college, everything would be finished. “If I can just pass this exam...” “If I can just get accepted...” “If I can just cross that one final line...” Then I can finally relax. Then life will somehow work itself out.

But of course, that is not how life works. Getting into college is not the end of life. In many ways, it is the beginning of a new one. A new environment opens before us. We meet new people. We encounter new ideas. We make choices—some small and some very important—that begin to shape the direction of our lives. What once looked like the finish line turns out to be a doorway. A threshold.

And I think we often make the same mistake in other parts of life. We imagine that there is one final threshold we need to cross, and once we cross it, everything will be settled. Sometimes we even think about faith that way. We may think baptism is the finish line. We may think confirmation is the finish line. We may think becoming a member of the church means that we have finally arrived. But baptism is not the end. Confirmation is not the end. They are beginnings. They are thresholds. They mark the beginning of learning how to live into a new identity. And that is the question at the heart of both of our Scripture readings today: What happens after God gives us a new identity?

In Exodus, Israel has already crossed an enormous threshold. They have left Egypt. They are no longer slaves to Pharaoh. They have crossed the sea. They have received food in the wilderness. They have arrived at Mount Sinai. God has entered

into a covenant with them. God has given them a new identity. They are no longer simply a collection of former slaves. They are becoming the people of God. Last week, we heard the Ten Commandments and reflected on what it means to remember whose we are. But today, only a short time later in the story, we discover that knowing whose we are and learning how to live that identity are not the same thing.

Moses goes up the mountain. And he stays there. The people wait. And wait. And wait. Eventually, they become anxious. They do not know what Moses is doing. They do not know what God is doing. So they turn to Aaron and say, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." Aaron tells them to remove the gold earrings they are wearing. He gathers the gold, melts it down, and makes a calf. And the people say, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

There is a deep irony in this story. Where did this gold come from? Earlier, in Exodus 12, as the Israelites were leaving Egypt, the Egyptians gave them silver and gold jewelry. But think about that for a moment. If you were heading into the wilderness, what would you bring with you? Water? Food? Something to protect you from the heat and cold? Would gold really be at the top of your list? Probably not. And yet, they carried gold with them. They brought gold from their former life in Egypt. Perhaps it reminded them of the world they had left behind. And now, in the wilderness, they take that gold from their past and use it to create an idol. They take something from their old life and make it the center of their new life.

They did not simply forget the Exodus. They misinterpreted what the Exodus meant. And notice something else. They do not stop being religious. Aaron builds an altar. He announces a festival. They offer burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being. They eat. They drink. They celebrate. They still have religious language. They still have ritual. They still tell a story about being brought out of Egypt. But they have changed the center of the story. The God who cannot be controlled has been replaced with something they can see. Something they can touch, carry, and manage. Israel did not simply lose its religion. It lost the meaning of its story.

And that may be one of the greatest dangers for any community of faith. We can remember the words and still forget what they mean. We can preserve the rituals and still lose their purpose. We can call ourselves the people of God and still misunderstand what that identity is for. Even the idea of being "chosen" can become a golden calf. If being chosen begins to mean, "We are better than they are," or "God belongs to us," or "We are inside, and everyone else is outside," then we have taken something God gave as a calling and transformed it into a possession. Because throughout Scripture, being chosen is not simply about

privilege. It is about responsibility. It is about becoming a people through whom God's blessing can reach beyond ourselves.

And that brings us to Jesus' parable. A king prepares a wedding banquet. He sends his servants to those who have already been invited. Everything is ready. But they refuse to come. Some simply ignore it. One goes to his farm. Another goes to his business. And eventually, the king sends his servants out into the streets. "Invite everyone you find." And Matthew gives us this remarkable detail: The servants gather "both good and bad." The banquet is filled with people who probably never expected to receive an invitation. They are not there because they are morally superior. They are not there because they have the right background. They are there because they received an invitation—and they responded. The invitation is grace. The response is faith.

But then the parable takes another uncomfortable turn. The king notices one person who is not wearing a wedding garment. It is a difficult part of the story. But I do not think Jesus' point is simply that someone showed up wearing the wrong clothes. These people had just been brought in from the streets. The invitation was not earned. So perhaps the wedding garment points toward something deeper. The wedding garment is not the price of admission. It is a sign that the invitation has begun to change us. Grace welcomes us as we are. But grace also calls us forward. To receive a new identity is to begin learning how to live into that identity.

That is also how I understand baptism and confirmation. Baptism is not the finish line. Confirmation is not graduation from church. They are ways we receive and affirm a new identity, and then begin the lifelong work of living into it. Baptism gives us a new identity. Discipleship teaches us how to live into it.

And that may help us hear Jesus' words: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Sometimes we hear that verse as though God invites many people but secretly wants only a few. But look at the parable. The invitation keeps expanding. When the first guests refuse, the king sends the servants farther—out into the streets, to anyone they can find, good and bad alike. So perhaps the central question is not, "Who has God decided to exclude?" Perhaps the question is: What are we doing with the invitation we have received?

Israel had already been chosen. They had already been liberated. Yet they still had to learn how to live as free people. The guests had been invited. Yet they still had to respond. The threshold is not the destination. God gives us a new identity so that a new way of life can begin. And that is why being chosen does not mean that God chooses us instead of other people. God chooses us for other people. To love, to serve, to welcome, to forgive, to seek justice, and to make room at the table. We are not chosen instead of others. We are chosen for others.

So the question today is not simply, "Am I one of the chosen?" The question is, How am I responding to the invitation? What am I doing with the freedom God has given me? What kind of person, and what kind of church, are we becoming because God has called us?

Crossing the threshold is only the beginning. Beyond the threshold, grace becomes discipleship, invitation becomes response, and a new identity becomes a new way of life. So may we hear God's invitation again. May we follow where God leads. And may we live into the people God has called us to be. Amen.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we know that receiving your grace is not the end, but the beginning of a faithful life. Help us live as your people, serving and loving our neighbors.

We are weak, and sometimes we forget how much you have given us and how freely you have forgiven us. Keep our neighbors before us, so that through serving them, we may remember your grace and share it with others.

Send us from this place to live as your people, with love, courage, and faithfulness.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.