

Such a Terrible Story!

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 19A

Matthew 22:1-14

I have a good friend, named Alfred, who heard I was preaching on this wedding banquet story from Matthew and said he looked forward to me spinning some good news out of this passage. Alfred shared that back in the day he'd been in a traveling band, and he'd made more than one friend who'd been rejected by a church because he had long hair or alternative clothing. The poor guy in today's parable? He'd been invited to the party in what was basically a cattle call. To be punished for what he'd been wearing at the time . . . it seems so unfair! Alfred also wondered about the last line of this passage – many called, few chosen; it reminded him of the U.S. Marines. Is this muscular Christianity? “I am definitely all set for the sermon!” Alfred said.

Truth be told, I was feeling the same way as I sat to think about this. I was curious about what good news could be spun from such a terrible story. For me, the sticking point was in the first part of the passage – the idea first of all, that invited guests would abuse and kill the servants bearing their invitations. And secondly, that a king would lash out in fury, murdering his subjects, burning his city. What good news is hidden in *THAT*?

It reminds me of something I heard the New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson say about the authority of scripture. I have a hard time keeping big church doctrines in mind, but when someone makes it plain, I tend to remember. Johnson said, “When we say that the Bible has authority for us, we mean that *EVEN WHEN WE THINK IT'S WRONG*, we believe the Bible has something to teach us. We pay attention to it.” Even when we think it's wrong.

So let's pay attention. And before I try to spin any good news . . . let's see what Jesus and Matthew are up to.

Jesus is speaking again in parables, and this parable is about a great banquet. The image of a banquet is not new – even as an image for the kingdom of God. In the psalms and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible we read about tables prepared and cups overflowing for individuals (like in Psalm 23) and for the nations, even *all the earth* (like in today's text from Isaiah). These banquet images were not always so generous. Between the times that the old and new testaments were written down, stories were told imagining God's *ELECT* eating and relaxing . . . while also *LAUGHING* at the *GENTILE* rulers who'd been ousted and punished. In other stories, the *PURE and RIGHTEOUS* were imagined to be welcomed by God, while so-called “sinners” (including people with illnesses and physical disabilities) were excluded. Jesus rejected such images in the stories *HE* told and in the way that he lived! He was famous for sitting to eat with *ALL KINDS* of people, including many who'd been considered impure. In Jesus' telling, God's banquet is for everyone, especially those you would least expect.

So Jesus talked about God's banquet, and told parables that included a banquet. Over the course of his ministry Jesus probably told today's parable many times (like anyone tells a good story repeatedly). And depending on his context and mood and the point he was trying to make, Jesus likely told the story different ways at different times. What's more, the folks who wrote Jesus' life story down (folks like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) recorded what they remembered or had heard about Jesus . . . and *AS THEY WROTE* for their particular communities, it is likely that their memory and agenda had some impact on what exactly they wrote. I know that's true for me. I preach for my congregation in a particular way. I preach somewhat differently for a college conference, or at an interfaith gathering. In different contexts, there are different things I want to emphasize. Similarly, if you watch the "Sermon for every Sunday" from three years ago, you'll hear a different preacher's perspective shaping their interpretation of this same story.

When the gospel-writer *Luke* tells Christ's banquet parable, the guests make elaborate excuses for being unable to come to the banquet ("I just bought some oxen; gotta go try 'em out!" "I'm newly married; can't come.") OK, then. The poor, the crippled, and the lame are welcomed in their stead. This version of Christ's story is consistent with Luke's understanding that Jesus calls us to a special concern for the poor rather than the rich, and the handicapped rather than the strong.

As for Matthew . . . he wanted on some level to help his early Christian community (which was a Jewish community, choosing to follow Jesus) – he wanted to help them *understand who they were, and how God was saving them*. Most scholars believe that, when Matthew wrote this story down, he started with a core banquet story that had been told by Jesus, and Matthew *ADDED* some things – surely things he believed were faithful to Christ's intent, things meant to help his community know Christ's purposes for them.

So, for instance, in Matthew's rendition of Christ's story, it is not just any banquet, it is a *WEDDING* banquet *for the KING'S son*. Matthew understood this parable to be an allegory of salvation. The people of Israel had been chosen by God, but they rejected *God's son*; Matthew's supposed additions to the parable make those connections clearer.

What's more, in this parable, the slaves bearing invitations are abused and killed – much like God's prophets to Israel (as well as the earliest Christian missionaries) were abused and in some cases killed.

Then also, the city is burned as a punishment. Matthew had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. There's reason to think he understood the fall of that city to be God's punishment for the way that Jerusalem had rejected Jesus Christ. Perhaps Matthew included *the burning of the city* in his version of this parable to underline the devastating consequences of rejecting Jesus as God's messiah.

Matthew certainly understood that NOW people are called to be baptized into a new identity in Christ, and that identity is described in many early Christian letters as being like a garment. We're meant to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, patience – does that sound familiar? Matthew knew it would sound familiar to *his* community. They

would say: “*that man not wearing wedding clothes? . . . he wasn’t attired in the baptismal garments of Christ – he wasn’t acting as a Christian should.*”

Did you get all that? It’s OK if you didn’t . . . Whatever you got, just hold it in mind as we make the leap of faith – the leap that says *all of this has authority for us*. Let’s pay attention to this story and trust it has something to teach us . . . even if we don’t share Matthew’s worldview or buy the idea that God would behave like the king in this story did.

However Jesus told the parable initially, he wanted us to glimpse God’s kingdom. And whatever version of the story you hear, God’s kingdom is a space God makes for people – people *you don’t actually expect* could make it into *anyplace good!* Maybe they’re poor and blind and lame. Maybe they’re good, but . . . *maybe they’re evil*. And *whatever* these people are like, *they haven’t EARNED a place at the table*. Their inclusion in *THIS party* is a gift of grace . . . a gift they’re meant to enjoy in responsible ways.

What is God’s kingdom like?

Back before the days of this pandemic I took a trip to Seattle, and while I was there, I visited a place called the Recovery Café. It was a space designed for people recovering from addiction and homelessness. But the folks who ran it said, “We’re all recovering from something. Consumerism. Grief. Depression. Arrogance. Church is a place that people recover.” The Recovery Café hopes to help its clients (and volunteers!) achieve more stability in their lives and *ALSO* develop more excitement for living . . . and more attention to the beauty all around them. There’s a party going on! The goal is to enjoy it.

As I recall, there were three essential components to life as part of the Recovery Café. One essential was accountability. Members had to be drug-free for 24 hours before they could come in to the café. Another essential was community. There were check-ins every week, where folks shared what they were grateful for, what they were feeling challenged by, and what plans they had for moving forward. The third essential was to give back in some way. Folks would sign up to help prepare the shared meals or clean up afterwards. Everyone was expected to take part in these ways. You had to, or you couldn’t stay. Use drugs, for instance? You needed to leave. But in 24 hours (24 drug-free hours!) you were welcomed to come again. Accountability, community, service, and second chances. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

For me another gathering comes to mind: an event I attended awhile back at the Islamic Center of Virginia. This was after one of the too-common events of violence worldwide – this one, a shooting in a mosque. We were praying for the victims. It was a terrible reason to gather . . . yet the gathering itself was a feast of love and support. Folks from various religious traditions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism) gave testimony, and it was easy to detect a common theme: the call to love, to treat one another with care and dignity, to embrace the gift of life.

As we traveled home, one of the folks I had gone with wondered: with such a common (and beautiful!) focus on love, *why do so many people turn toward hatred?* We talked a bit about “original sin” and “total depravity” . . . and later I got to thinking about a diagram I’d seen, illustrating ways human indifference can worsen and manifest in acts of violence. The drawing was a pyramid, the base of which was indifference: people not caring about other people, just getting wrapped up in their own concerns. As you moved up the pyramid, what happened? Some people began thinking they were better than other people; they wanted to *EARN* their place at the table, you know? . . . they disparaged the people who couldn’t do that. Moving up the pyramid, judgment becomes discrimination. Discrimination becomes a call for exclusion, then imprisonment, then violence against the other. (Remember the abuse and the killing of the servants in the parable.) This particular diagram was called “The Pyramid of White Supremacy” . . . but really, anytime we’re indifferent to one another . . . anytime we judge or lash out against people we don’t understand, *it’s step we take toward burning our cities down. WE* do that. We burn our cities down.

Michael Knopf, who’s the rabbi at Temple Beth-El, spoke at the Islamic Center. He said that according to Jewish tradition, God is perpetually in tears due to the brokenness of our world. Michael shared one of the first teachings in the Babylonian Talmud. The teaching is that God arises several times each night, unable to rest, and roars like a lion in pain, crying out over the brokenness of our world. In the kingdom of heaven, God responds to human hatred and violence like a raging, howling lion.

Finally, thinking as Matthew did about the Church – where good and bad people are gathered together and *expected* to wear the garments of Christ . . . I’m reminded of an article John Pavlovitz wrote, where he said,

I’m tired. I’m tired of professed Christians preaching a Jesus that they seem to have no interest at all in emulating; of religious people being a loud, loveless noise in the world while claiming to speak for a God who is supposedly love . . . [I’m starting a new church, Pavlovitz said] – the Church of Not Being Horrible. Our mission statement is simply this: *Don’t be horrible to people: Don’t treat them as less worthy of love, respect, dignity, joy, and opportunity than you are. Don’t create caricatures out of them based on their skin color, their religion, their sexual orientation, the amount of money they have, the circumstances they find themselves in. Don’t seek to take away things from them that you already enjoy in abundance: civil rights, clean water, education, marriage, access to healthcare. Don’t tell someone’s story for them about why they are poor, depressed, addicted, victimized, alone.*

I imagine God’s heavenly bouncer, saying similar things!

Is there is someone in heaven keeping watch, making sure that no one is being horrible to anyone else? I hope that won’t be necessary. I hope that by then, we will *ALL* understand

what Christians *MUST DO* to emulate Christ. Either way, the kingdom of heaven will be safe for everyone, because *NO ONE will be permitted to hurt anyone else.*

I am definitely all set for that! (to quote my friend Alfred). To me, that sounds like good news.

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