

Sermon October 15, 2023
[Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14]

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Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

This doesn't read like much of a Gospel does it? It's a parable of judgment, the last of three that Jesus tells in this section of Matthew's Gospel, and as I said at the beginning of the service, it is one preachers often, myself included, dread to cover. And the reason for that, I think, is this: This parable of judgment is one that can easily be used to hit people over the heads who are already here in church. And I'm not a big fan of that. But I do think that sometimes a word of challenge can be a good thing. So, I invite you in that spirit with me to be challenged by today's parable.

At first glance, this parable makes no sense. A king sends out an invitation to a wedding banquet, one that means a great feast, that no one accepts. The limitations are met with indifference; people don't seem to care. One goes back to his field, the other to his business, and nothing changes.

So, the king sends out a second invitation, which itself is quite unusual. Only this time the servants are not met with indifference. They are inexplicably mocked, mistreated, and murdered. That's a pretty harsh response to an invitation, isn't it? The king responds disproportionately with punishment that doesn't fit the crime. In language that reminds me of the conflict now underway in the Middle East, the king destroys an entire city and burns it to the ground – all because of some rejected party invitations.

The wedding banquet occurs immediately thereafter, which is kind of odd, given that the context for the wedding, the setting, is a city in ruins. And the least-likely of guests fill the wedding hall, as Matthew tells us, both good and bad.

Finally, there is one guest who is ejected from the party, who is cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, simply for not wearing the proper attire. No wonder he's speechless!

The commentator Thomas Long explains. "The obvious objection to this strange twist in the story – that is, the wedding guest being ejected – is to protest that the man could not be expected to have on a wedding garment, because he, like the other guests was recruited off the streets! A man plowing a field or attending a shop cannot be expected to pack a wedding garment in his lunchbox, just in case of late breaking invitation slides down the chute!"

At first glance therefore this parable makes no sense. Why would a king destroy an entire city simply because people there didn't accept his multiple invitations to a party, and why would this guest be ejected into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth simply because he didn't wear a wedding robe?

Once more, this doesn't make sense, and there's a reason why. You ready? It's not supposed to! (Like, "Okay, Pastor Dan, that's great; sermon over!") *It's not supposed to make sense.* Let me explain.

You recall how the Gospel reading for today began. "Once more" – so this has been now the third time – "Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven (sometimes translated the kingdom *from* heaven) may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.'"

This is a clue Matthew provides for how to interpret the story that follows. *It's a parable.* A parable is not intended for literal interpretation. Just think of how absurd it would be if, after Jesus telling this parable, somebody in the back raises their hand and says, "Yeah, but was that true? Did it really happen?" It's not meant for literal interpretation. It is not a real-life story, but a fictional, subversive story that surprises audiences.

There's something more going on here as well. This parable is also an *allegory*, which means that *things in this parable stand for other things.* An allegory, in other words, is a story with two different levels of meaning. How do we know that? Because of all the obvious absurdities I just delineated, absurdities that, taken literally, make no sense whatsoever. These absurdities, in turn, force attention away from what happens in the story to what it means at a deeper level. Matthew, in short, *intends* this to be read as an allegory. The reason the story doesn't make sense, as I said a few moments ago, is that it's not supposed to. We're supposed to be looking at its deeper meaning, or what it's *really* talking about.

Okay, so how do we decode or decipher the story's deeper meaning? How do we unlock it? And how, if at all, does it apply to us? Why should we care?

Well, let's start with the first of these questions. We can decode the story's deeper meaning by reading it in its original historical context. What was going on at the time Matthew refers to symbolically? What was happening? Beyond that, we can ask what Matthew assumed or may have assumed his audience would understand in terms of the references he made.

So, if we keep in mind context and audience, we can decode this otherwise-implausible tale, which can help us determine how, if it all, it applies to us today. That is some heavy lifting – but are you ready for it? ... I heard mostly "Yes," so let's begin.

I invite you to take out the Gospel reading and look at the first verse of the text. "Once more, Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.'"

Wedding banquet. That's the first thing we should focus on. The reference is naturally to the Messianic banquet, which is not only mentioned in the New Testament, Revelation 19, but also in the rabbinic literature of the time. At the end of the age, the Jewish tradition held all the people of God, that is Israel, would enjoy a Messianic

banquet in their transition from this life to the life to come. This is why, several weeks ago, I mentioned that when it comes to thinking about salvation biblically, instead of looking *up* in terms of going to heaven, the Jews and the early Christians looked *ahead* in terms of the Messianic age that awaited them at the end of the present era. That's a huge difference, and it's important to consider here.

What about this reference to a king? Who is this "king" in our parable? We have the obvious meaning; what's the deeper level of meaning? The king stands for – ? God! (Perfect. That person gets an A. Very good.)

The king stands for God, who gave a wedding banquet for his son, which is or who is – ? Jesus! (Now remember, if ever I ask you a question and you don't know the answer, say "Jesus" and you'll be fine!) Okay? So, a king, God, gave a wedding banquet that is a great feast, symbolizing the Messianic feast (in the age or "life of the world to come" to use the language of our Creed), for his son, namely Jesus.

He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited – now we're at verse 3 – to come to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. All right, let's decode this. What do you think the term "his slaves" or rather who, do they refer to? I heard three answers – it's like Pentecost in here – and I think I heard "prophets" – that is correct! It's the prophets. Right? So the prophets are the slaves.

The king, that is God, sends to those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, now *who were those invited* to the wedding banquet? Jesus criticizes them repeatedly in the middle section here of Matthew... The Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious leaders, the religious elite of the time.

So now this should start making sense. Jesus tells a parable, which is also an allegory, talking about a king, who represents God, a wedding banquet, which represents the life in the world to come, and the son, who represents Jesus. God, in turn sends his slave, which means the prophets, to call those invited, namely the Pharisees and the Sadducees, to the wedding banquet: but they would not come. They rejected the message, not only of the prophets before, but of Jesus as well. Fascinating, isn't it?

Take a look at verse four. Again, he sent other slaves, more prophets. He sent other slaves saying, "Tell those who have been invited" – which again would be the religious leaders – "Look, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fatted calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."

Now, why would this king mention his oxen and his fatted calves? It refers to the nature of the feast, you might say, in this case, oxen and fatted calves – think about the story of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke. That is the best food available for a wedding feast. So, the king is going to make a big deal of this. God's kingdom, in turn, is a celebration, like a wedding banquet, with Jesus Himself as the bridegroom.

Recall as well, once more, that the slaves in verses 3 and 4 are prophets. In verse 10, we'll see momentarily they are – I won't tell you yet. This is a common image, that is,

slaves are prophets sent by God who are rejected by the religious leaders. But these leaders in turn – take a look at verse six – these leaders made light of it, and went away, each one to his farm, his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. And then what does he do? Well, first of all, seizing his slaves and killing them is not only a reference to the way the religious leaders of the time treat the prophets, like John the Baptist; it's also a foreshadowing of what event in Jesus's life – ? The crucifixion. So, there's a lot more going on than this story might at first seem.

So the king was enraged; he was upset. He was upset, and so he sends his troops. Now who might his troops be, in terms of context – ? Rome. Roman soldiers. These soldiers destroyed those murderers and burned their city. What city do you think Matthew's Jesus has in mind? Remember, Matthew was written somewhere around the early 80s of the first century, about 10 years after what famous event occurred with respect to the Jews – ? Their Temple was destroyed by Rome. As an expression, Matthew says, of God's punishment for those who have not accepted the Christ.

This third parable rehearses the elites' rejection and outlines their judgment. The repetition underlies the gravity of the elites' response, and accounts for the fall of Jerusalem in 70 as an act of God's judgment, carried out *unwittingly* by Rome against religious elites and their rejection of God's Son, or agent, Jesus of Nazareth.

So, the king would be the Emperor, you might say, but more broadly, the king is the one who sends his troops to do God's bidding and destroy those who rejected the Christ.

“Then he said to his slaves, the wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

Now this is kind of interesting. Who do you think this third group of people are? “Go into the streets and invite everyone” for the kingdom of God is a party... Who are they – ? Apostles! Who said it? Raise your hand. Very good, you win, A-plus! The apostles, or more broadly, Christian missionaries; who went out into the streets and invited *everyone* to participate in the celebration of the kingdom of God.

Now this reference to streets or “main streets,” the Greek actually means street corners, or *exits* from the city. So, it's not just “go to everyone.” It's “Go to the riffraff!” Go to those on the margins. Go to those who are poor. Go to those who are good and bad. Gathering all from whom they found, they include Gentiles, male and female, of any socio-economic level, especially the poor. So we're not talking about simply the main streets. We're talking about the street corners, or the exits out of town, where the riffraff hang out. “Go to them,” God says, or the king says, “and invite them to the wedding banquet; for the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

But then the king came to see the guests, and he noticed a man who was not wearing a wedding robe. Now, why is that a big deal? So what? Why is his not wearing a wedding robe a big deal? Well, we have to ask ourselves, what does the wedding robe represent? What does it stand for?

The wedding garment symbolizes *the Christian life*. Like other clothing metaphors in the New Testament, this garment represents being attired in “the new self created in God’s own likeness” – that’s from Ephesians 4 – clothing oneself with Christ, with compassion, with kindness, with humility, meekness, and patience of the one who belongs to the Kingdom. That’s Colossians 3, but it’s also pictured quite beautifully in our Second Reading. That is the life to which we are called. To wear the wedding garment, therefore, is to *accept* that life; to be clothed by that life; to live that life.

The king notices this man is not prepared for the feast. His behavior and actions are not worthy for the Kingdom from heaven. And so he says to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” (To which the man replied, “Aw, Pastor Dan said, ‘Go! Go ahead and go, and you’ll be fine!’” Right?)

So – he says “friend,” but guess what? That doesn’t mean what we think it means. “Friend,” in Matthew, always has a negative connotation. Something like “Buster.” Or, as my mom used to say, “Look, mister!” Right? So it reads rather differently, doesn’t it?

“Hey, Buster. How did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless.

The king addresses him once more as “friend.” But do not be misled by this word in Jesus’s teaching, for when he called someone “friend,” it was always in an ironic sense, and a word of judgment followed – in this case, a word as well as an action.

Now the man is speechless, as I might be in that context, perhaps you might be, too; we’ll say a little more about that by way of conclusion, but for now, I want to focus on the end of the parable, which is basically the lesson Jesus is trying to teach.

“For many are called but few are chosen.”

In other words, God wants everybody at the party. But not everybody wants to come, or knows how to behave when they get there.

So, we have – congratulations – now decoded this allegorical parable, showing how things in this parable stand for other things. King stands for God; the son stands for Jesus; the wedding banquet stands for the Messianic banquet at the end of time, or rather the end of the age. The soldiers, or troops, are referenced to Rome; the burning of the city is the burning of Jerusalem in 70 AD, an expression of God’s punishment. Those who go into the main streets or to the street corners are the Christian missionaries, who invite everyone they find to the wedding banquet, both good and bad. The wedding robe itself represents the acknowledgement and acceptance of what it means to live a Christian life – again, as outlined in Philippians 4, our Second

Reading for today. And finally, the man who does not accord with those expectations is speechless, which may be a sign of his guilt, and cast into the outer darkness, which represents judgment.

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

One thing more to consider: this Messianic feast we’re talking about is beautifully detailed in our First Reading, where we hear about the mountain, on top of which there will be no more death, and tears will be wiped from our eyes.

A lot of heavy lifting, like I said!

So what?

How does this apply to us?

We can see how it applies to Christians maybe in the first century, but how in the world does it cross 20-plus centuries and apply to us?

Well, I think it raises for us a big question. Do we take for granted what *we* are being offered?

Every week, we celebrate a foretaste of the feast to come in the Eucharist and Holy Communion. Do we recognize, when we put out our hands, that we are all, in Martin Luther’s language, “beggars” when it comes to our need for mercy and forgiveness? Do we recognize that? Do *you* think about that when you put out your hands? It’s the only time in our lives that we may do this.

Are we beggars? Do we have a need for mercy and forgiveness? Or do we simply go through the motions of the Eucharist, without thinking about what it could mean? Do we feel a sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude when we receive such forgiveness through the bread and the wine of the Eucharist? Do we partake in the sacrament worthily, as the Apostle Paul asks in First Corinthians?

And what about church in general? And here I’m about to step on some very thin ice, but I’ll do it anyway. Do we make light of attending services, the way those who received the invitation did, but had more important things to do, like watch the game, or go to soccer practice?

There are two ways that I can be removed as pastor in this congregation. The first, and I’m sure the choir will back me up, is if I advocate for screens in the sanctuary. Am I correct? Okay, yes.

The second is going after the jugular, which is sports.

I can’t tell you how much it bothers me when people at the door on their way out make a reference to, “I’ve got to get going, the game’s on” or “I missed church last week because the game’s on.”

I laugh politely. But inside I think, I wonder, “Are you taking what we do here seriously? Is this simply the equivalent of a ballgame? Now, not to criticize baseball games or football games or whatever; but what are our priorities here? Sure, sports can be important. But how much more important is our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and the promise of the wedding banquet that is so essential to our faith?”

The other one, by the way that really bothers me is when somebody says, “Oh, I’m a Christmas and Easter Christian. I come to church only twice a year,” – and then looks to me for a laugh... I’m not laughing inside. I’m very *much* not laughing. And that’s because – not because of the person’s attempt at humor. God knows I’ve tried a million times, many of which you have not laughed at. It’s not about their humor – It’s about what they’re saying about the worship service itself; they’re *mocking* it. Or at least, they’re expressing a kind of indifference to what we do here every week. It’s why I remind people on Easter Sunday. “Hey, we have worship again next Sunday. Right? Love to see you back. Got a good thing going here. Promise and forgiveness and grace every Sunday, whenever possible.”

The Biblical commentator Thomas Long captures what I’m trying to say perfectly.

Thomas Long writes, “This parable urgently reminds us that being a part of the Christian community should make a discernible difference in who we are and how we live. In other words, there should be a sense of awe and responsiveness about belonging to the church, belonging to the community of Christ, being a child of the Kingdom of heaven. Sure, the spotlighted guest in the parable was pressed in off the street unexpectedly, and was probably wearing cut-offs and clodhoppers. But, when he got inside, only a fool would fail to see the difference between what he wore and where he was. He was in the banquet hall of the king. He was at the wedding feast for the royal son. The table was set with the finest food. The best wine flowed from regal chalices. He is the recipient, as are you and I, of massive grace. Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? Where is his regard for generosity? The other guests humbly, quietly trade in their street clothes for the best of wedding garments of worship and celebration. But there he is, bellying up to the punchbowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt. When the host demands to know where his wedding garment is, he is speechless, and well he should be. In his self-absorption, he hadn’t the foggiest idea, until that very moment, that he was at the wedding banquet at all. He didn’t take it seriously. Just so, to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether-unmerited invitation of Christ, and then not conform one’s life to that mercy, is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a local dive bar.”

Whew!

At first glance, this parable makes no sense. Once decoded, however, we can see how Jesus puts to each of us, myself included, challenging questions:

What is *your* response to the offer of God's mercy every Sunday, through word and sacrament?

Are you humble enough to know sometimes you need forgiveness?

Is this life we rehearse each Sunday in worship, one to which your life conforms out there in the real world, in terms of how you treat others?

Very hard questions, I know. But thank God this parable is not next Sunday's reading. May God in the meantime, grant you and I a spirit of honesty, in our response to these hard questions, as well as grace when we acknowledge we can do better or have fallen short.

And all God's people said "Amen!"