

Weekend of Sunday, October 11, 2020
19th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 28/Proper 23/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9
Second Reading: Philippians 4:1-9
Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:1-14
Sermon Title: “The Banquet is Ready”

Theme

Jesus tells a parable indicating that the blessings of God’s kingdom are available to all, but the invitation is not to be taken lightly.

Text

¹Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Sermon

I should tell you, this is *not* one of my favorite Bible readings, but the beauty of the lectionary our church follows is that generally, I don't get to choose what I preach on. That is a safeguard for all of us, and so even when I find a text troubling I still have to deal with it, and that means you have to deal with it too.

In the Lutheran tradition of preaching there is always to be *law and gospel* held in equal tension. Though I, as the preacher, rarely announce where and what it is, I always make it present even if it is transparent to you. And this text certainly has it. Let's review this story in several steps so that I can first explain it and then second apply to our lives.

To begin with, let me remind you that this is a story follows the last couple of week's Gospel Readings directly, so if you recall, it was Monday of Holy Week and Jesus had already upset the chief priests and the elder of the people, and in dialogue with them, he claimed divine authority and identified himself with the sons in the parables he told, just like he did in today's Gospel Reading. Last week's Gospel Reading concluded with Matthew's notation that:

^{21:45}When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

If you are a student of the Gospels as I am, then you know that during Holy Week Jesus just got more irritated and more provocative as the week went on as if he was asking for a fight – a fight that he got. But I'm getting ahead of myself, back to today's Gospel Reading.

The parable Jesus told is a metaphorical story. That means that the story is not to be understood as being based in reality, but rather is used to represent a greater spiritual truth. So first off, let me warn you not to get lost in the details. The details are not what is important.

The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, shared stories. No big surprise, those who were Disciples of Jesus and went on the journey with him shared many of the same experiences. So it should be no surprise that a similar version shows up

in Luke's Gospel although it is modified per Luke's theology. A similar version can also be found in the Gospel of Thomas, a pseudepigraphal book, meaning a book that didn't make it into the canon of the Bible. However, Matthew alone adds the last part (:11-14) which I find the most disturbing.

Jesus began by saying this story he is about to tell is important because it tells us something about the kingdom of heaven, and that is a popular subject among believers, right? Even today, we want to know what it is and how we can get there, or what's the use of a life of faith that calls us to be selfless, am I right?

Matthew is also alone in elevating the host of the wedding. Matthew wrote that Jesus' metaphor involves a king. Luke just calls the host "someone." That is a big difference and that changes everything. We live in a democratic society. Our leaders are elected by the people and if they fail to perform they can be removed from office. A country ruled by a king is a different sort of thing. If the king is powerful and even somewhat fair to his subjects, odds are in his favor that he will reign long. Furthermore, as a king, he has considerable influence, perhaps even autocratic control over all he rules.

Well, the king in the parable has a son and the son is getting married. A son represents legacy for the king and so of course this is a proud and important matter for the king. He plans a royal wedding banquet and invites the who's who of his kingdom to attend.

There was a custom in that day to first send out an invitation well in advance of the event that was to be acknowledged and accepted by the recipient. Later, at the time of the event, another reminder was sent out to tell the guests that the party is about to begin, come now.

So according to the story and true to the custom of the day, Jesus' king sends out his slaves to remind those who have already accepted his invitation that the party has begun, but they won't come. (*I did mention that this was a king didn't I?*) Well, the king doesn't get too upset. He patiently sends out another bunch of slaves to tell his subjects that the banquet that they have already RSVP'd to is ready. No expense has been spared. Please come *now*.

But the guests have all kinds of lame excuses and so some of the guests “make light of it” and return to their respective businesses. (*I did mention that this was a king didn't I?*) And others “seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them,” wrote Matthew. (*Did I mention that this was a king?*) Make a note of this, if you are a commoner, a subject of the king, you don't mess with the king. A little nugget of pastoral wisdom for you there.

Matthew wrote in verse 7, “The king was enraged.” Do ya think so?

Matthew continued, that according to Jesus, the king is so enraged that he sends his armies out to kill the murderous and unappreciative guests and to completely raze their villages. (*Did I mention this was a king?*) Yea, they can do that.

Then he says to his slaves, “Those weren't worthy of being my guests. Go out into the streets and invite everyone you see to come in and feast at my banquet table.” They do and the banquet hall is filled. And the king is happy and the people are happy and everyone is happy.

Now I told you this story is a metaphor so let me tell you what it means.

- Not surprisingly, the king is God.
- The king's son is God's Son, Jesus.
- The wedding banquet is the manifest kingdom of God, the return to Eden, heaven.
- The guests who originally agreed to come then don't are the Jews.
- The first slaves are the Hebrew prophets. They tried desperately to get their own people to turn from their wicked and godless ways to no avail.
- The second slaves are the Christian missionaries who Jesus foreknew will be rejected too. Remember that this Gospel was written down well after the resurrection, and Jesus had a knack for knowing things well before they happened.
- The second group of guests, the people pulled in off the streets are the Gentiles; us, in other words. After the Gospel is rejected by the Jews, it will be taken to the Gentiles.

The message: God calls all to a great party and we should all do everything in our power to make that event. Right?

And had the story ended here, like Luke's version, I would be happier.

But the story doesn't end here. No, Matthew's version goes on for another four verses and it is in those four verses that I get squeamish.

Let me read those four verses to you again:

¹¹But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen."

What? The king sends his slaves out onto the streets to beg people to come in and celebrate with him. When one goes out and recruits off the street, one should expect ... anybody! And to think those anybodies would be dressed appropriately is, in my opinion, silly. Imagine getting pulled in off the street by your king who insists you stay for his party. Are you staying? Yes, of course you are. Are you dressed for a palatial party? Probably not. So then what is going on here? Well, I am so glad you asked.

In the early church, a new identity as a Christian through conversion was often illustrated by the donning of a new set of clothes as a way of expressing the giving up of one's old ways of living for a new way of life in Christ. For example in Galatians 3:26 the apostle Paul wrote,

As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.

In some Christian traditions, candidates for baptism, no matter what their age, are dressed in new, often white, suits of clothes for their baptisms.

That symbolizes that those who accept Christ as their savior and become part of this new community of faith called the church are expected to be different, perhaps even noticeably different, by their new lifestyle of doing good deeds and avoiding the

doing of evil deeds. In other words, if they were put on trial for being a Christian there would be enough evidence to convict them. But for those who claim to be Christian but live lives unchanged by their baptism and conversion to Christ, today we might call them posers, well they have not clothed themselves in Christ and are to be unceremoniously dismissed, like the wedding guests not dressed appropriately.

Back to the wedding banquet. Those outside the king's first tier of invitations, the people on the street who are randomly invited into the king's palatial banquet hall, are the Gentiles – us. Remember, in Jewish thought, there were two kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles; Jews and everybody else. So according to Jesus and this parable he told, the Gospel is for us, as well as for them. No one is excluded.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

And this is where we begin to apply this story to our own situation. I'm not passing judgment here, but some of us who are baptized into Christ have never put on the new clothes of the Christian, metaphorically speaking. Some of us fail to live lives that convict us of the faith we say we have. The conclusion of this metaphor is a warning for those who identify with this – the posers. The true test of faith is in the living of Christ-like lives. What we *do* and *not* just what we say. This is the law side of this sermon.

But there is Gospel too. It is still not too late to change. A day is coming when it will be too late, but that day is not today as far as I can tell.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are not living the life worthy of your calling as Christians, then the time to change is now. The banquet is ready.

Prayer

Lord of the banquet, though we are certainly not worthy, we give you thanks for your generous invitation to join you at your Father's wedding banquet, now and in the eternal future. No amount of new white clothes can cover our sinfulness, but you said the words from the cross that make living our lives according to your example, an honor worth pursuing. Though we will continue to mess up, accept our

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efforts, and purge them with your mercy, so that we may enter the great banquet hall dressed appropriately in your grace. We pray this in your holy name, Amen