

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Matthew 22:1–14

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God’s Spirit.

Open our ears to hear your word when it reassures us and when it challenges us. Grant to us, Great God, the guidance of your Spirit. Give us the wisdom to know how best to temper justice with mercy, to buttress mercy with justice, so that your will may be done on earth as in heaven; through Jesus Christ, our teacher and example. Amen

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. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again 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.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

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.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then 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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Friends, I’m kinda done with Matthew. I’m a little over the hyperbole and awful stories. I’ve had my fill of weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ Here again we have a confusing story that escalates quickly. Of all the hard stories we have heard the last few weeks, this one might be the worst. It’s pretty awful.

This might be the time to give you an insight to or remind you that we follow a lectionary, or an assigned set of readings for each Sunday. We have been deliberately preaching through the Gospel of Matthew this fall as we signed on to be a Matthew 25 Church of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The initiative that encourages churches to commit to congregational vitality, dismantling racism, and eradicating poverty. So, we have been following a suggested schedule of working our way through Matthew. I kind of wished we followed something like the embroidered pillow lectionary, where every reading was an inspirational passage fit for a throw pillow on your grandma’s couch. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” or “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.” Or “For I know the plans I have for you...” All very good scriptures that I love. But our story today is not those. I will add, one of the reasons I like following a lectionary is for this very reason, if left to my own devices you might not hear a story like this. With a lectionary, or set of assigned readings, it makes us struggle and think with scripture, to be open to new possibilities, and maybe moved from

our places of comfort, which, when you think of it, is what Jesus does a lot.

This parable, taken on its own, is both confusing and disturbing. The King invites people to his son's wedding banquet. When the invitees refuse his invitation, he destroys them. Yep, he wipes out their villages; burns them to the ground. Then he sends his herald into the streets and invites everyone to come. Do you think anyone would refuse after they saw what he did to the first bunch that turned him down?

The people do come. They fill up his banquet hall. Yet, the King spots a person who does not have the proper clothing for a wedding feast. What does the king do? He throws the poor guy out on his ear, into utter darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus ends the parable with these chilling words, "many are called, but few are chosen." What???? And what??? Yet another story in Matthew where no one seems the hero. No character that seems like they may be a stand in for God. Another prominent leader who doesn't show mercy.

There is a theme in Matthew, in several of these difficult stories, of invitation and response, or maybe more to the point, lack of response. Matthew was speaking to a community that was in turmoil. It was a fledgling community of mostly Jewish people who believed that Jesus was the anointed one from God, the Messiah. And those that followed Jesus were fighting with their siblings who weren't sure about whether Jesus was the Messiah, and all of this was set against the backdrop of Roman domination and oppression. The temple had been destroyed, there were factions in the faith community, and Matthew is making an all-out attempt to convince the members, or maybe former members of Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew, in story after story, suggest that God will reject those that do not believe in Jesus.

In this possible interpretation of the original context, the elites who are first invited but do not come to the party, and even treat the King's servants poorly are meant to stand in for the Jewish religious leaders, the destruction of their cities by the king is meant to be understood as the Roman destruction of the Temple, and the invitation given to everyone and anyone is meant to highlight the inclusion and spread of the Gospel to Gentiles. And the part at the end, with the wedding guest wearing the wrong thing and being thrown out may seem to stress that those that do accept the invitation should be totally committed in their discipleship in following the ways of Jesus. It serves as another warning to possible disciples that you need to be all in.ⁱ

And maybe that was how it was originally understood, or what Matthew intended, but it doesn't make the story any less ugly or disturbing. And it should be noted that stories like these in scripture have been used in history to bolster antisemitic beliefs and hateful and violent actions against Jews. So, we need to be careful to ensure we don't perpetuate any hatefulness in how we approach and interpret these stories for our lives.

Along those lines, the other thing that is important to remember is that the community to which Matthew was communicating was marginalized. Most of us are not part of a marginalized community, and so while it is helpful to know what the original context of the story was, it is not our context, and the original context does not have to limit how we understand the story. Story has many possibilities.

Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament scholar that Mary mentioned a couple of weeks ago who has spent much time with the parables of Jesus, argues that religion is meant to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," and that Jesus' stories are often meant to do the last part of that sentiment, afflict the comfortable. She notes that if we read

the parables of Jesus and we feel cozy or unprovoked, then we probably aren't reading them correctly. We really aren't understanding or seeing them for the challenge they may provide.

The two possible interpretations that I alluded to earlier, I think are problematic. I can't believe in and follow a God that is like a king who privileges one group over another and would see the destruction of the temple as divine punishment for not believing in a certain way. Even though I like the idea of a God continually inviting people to be part of the feast, to think that those that do not accept the invitation are then destroyed and have their cities burned down as a result, that is a God of violence and vengeance. So much for the God of the New Testament being all about love and the Old Testament God being violent.

Similarly, to have a wedding guest who has been pulled off the street, accepted the invitation unlike the others, to then be thrown out because he isn't wearing the right outfit seems undeniably cruel.

One pastor and writer I read this week, suggests that with stories in scripture sometimes the most honest approach is to express regret, repentance, and reorientation. She suggests that one thing we should regret and repent of in this story is, "its false and terrifying depiction of God. As Christ's followers, do we really believe in a God as petty, vengeful, hotheaded, and thin-skinned as the king in this parable? A God who burns an entire city to the ground in order to appease his wounded ego? A God who forces people to celebrate his son's marriage while his armies wreak destruction right outside? A God who casts an impoverished guest into the "outer darkness" for reasons the guest absolutely can't control?"ⁱⁱ

With stories like this, perhaps the best approach is to be honest about our regret, repent where we may need, and then reorient with a new understanding. With that in mind, I offer two other ways to enter this

story as a possible reorientation, and that is to consider the guest who is thrown out. Perhaps we could call this the parable of the wedding guest.

As I said earlier, it seems odd and cruel to our ears that this invited guest being pulled off the street would then be thrown out into the darkness amongst the weeping and gnashing of teeth. We assume the guest is innocent of all wrong-doing and doesn't deserve to be thrown out of the party for not wearing the appropriate wedding attire. But there is another possibility when you consider that it is entirely feasible that this wedding guest may have been provided the wedding attire by the host and so there is no reason he shouldn't be wearing it.

Some scholars note that a royal wedding of this sort had many customs. Among them would be for the host to provide a wedding gown that guests would wear over their clothes. One of the reasons was that at a large event like this, if there was someone not wearing the appropriate attire, you would know they were an uninvited guest because they did not look like everyone else. But maybe, since anyone and everyone was invited to this party, or as the scripture says, the servant gathered "all they could find, the good and the bad," our guest was not interested in looking like everyone else. After all, how could you tell him apart from the bad people? If all the distinctions are taken away, if just anyone can be in, how we will know who is acceptable? How will we know who is in and who is out?

Perhaps this guest who is thrown out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth is hearing the sound of his own weeping and gnashing. Maybe he is grumbling at the absurdity of anyone getting to be at the party, even those who are bad. Even those who don't deserve it. It kind of reminds me of the older brother standing outside of the party the father has thrown for the son who has returned,

refusing to join in on the celebration. Maybe we should be careful about our own judgements of who gets to be at the party?

The second possibility about the guest who is thrown out goes even further and is suggested by the pastor I mentioned earlier. What if the guest who gets thrown out is meant to represent Jesus? What if the guest who refuses to wear the robe that everyone else is wearing is a deliberate act of silent resistance?

The host of this party, when ignored by the guests on the first invite list, gathered his army and killed them and wiped out their cities because of a bruised ego. This king is petty and vengeful, violent and cruel. I can't imagine that after the people knew of the king's response that they would say no to an invitation. Did the guests really have a choice in the matter? Maybe the guest is Jesus who would rather suffer the humiliation of being bound hand and foot and cast out rather than accept the authority of a violent king? What does it look like to sit with that possibility?

The pastor writes, "What would change for you if Jesus was the unrobed guest and *not* the furious king in this story? How would *you* have to change to welcome such a guest? To honor such a guest? To *accompany* such a guest? What robes of privilege, power, wealth, empire, location, and complicity would you have to refuse to wear? What holy rebuke would you have to speak or embody when the king demands your cheery presence at his table? What feasts would you have to forego to follow the unrobed dissenter when he's escorted into the darkness, bound and broken for the sake of love?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes a parable can tell us who God is, but maybe it can also tell us who God isn't. And when we put a particular story in conversation with the whole of scripture, we can often give an honest and needed critique of a story. We can better see what God isn't. When we reflect on the

God of mercy, justice, and grace, when we center the core theology of Jesus as one who shows radical hospitality, abundant grace, sacrificial love, unmerited mercy, and prophetic imagination, then the king and his actions in this story cannot be of God.

To think of the parable in this way, is then to feel the uncomfortable force of what it means if we center the one who is outcast. To change the location of who we most often identify with or who we think we want to be – those guests who show up and diligently put on the robes – not like those others who never bothered to show up in the first place, or the one who wasn't behaving appropriately once he did show up.

Again and again, Jesus centers the marginalized and challenges us to join him in those efforts. We who are comfortable, should be careful that we get too comfortable when Jesus starts telling a story. Maybe this story is an invitation to us to live into the discomfort of choosing to be on the outside. To choose affliction over apathy, even if it makes us lose a place in the palace. Maybe it means we refuse the feast when the cities are burning, and violence is being done. May we embrace the God who is love, mercy, justice, compassion, and may we always reject the invitation of the powers that deal in violence and disarm all that would bind God's children.

Amen.

ⁱ For more detail, see David Lose <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/10/pentecost-19-a-limited-vision/>

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2777-the-god-who-isn-t>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.