

The Wedding Banquet
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
October 15, 2023
Matthew 22: 1-14 (NIV)

Our text this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew. It is a parable about the reign of God that Jesus tells in an adversarial encounter with the religious leaders in the temple during the last week of his life. It's the third parable that happens in this context.

Jesus taught in stories. He often used hyperbole, exaggeration, to get our attention. As author Cheryl Lindsay writes, "When asked about doctrine, Jesus tells a story. When questioned on precepts, Jesus tells a story. The answers to the questions about belief come not from commands, but from a story that demonstrates how human beings relate to God and to one another. Even as Jesus shares the greatest commandment – to love God and your neighbor as yourself – it is in the context of a story. Following Jesus is not about what you believe but how you relate."

I find this reminder particularly helpful when approaching what is arguably a very uncomfortable story, one that is challenging, and a bit bizarre, particularly as I am honest enough to admit those times and ways I find myself in alignment with the world's values and culture, rather than with God's purposes and invitation to engagement in the world. This particular parable has been a source of speculation and debate for centuries. It isn't easy!

After telling two parables, Matthew tells us that the chief priests and pharisees realized that Jesus was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but would not because they feared the crowds, who saw him as a prophet.

22 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

⁴“Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

⁵“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. ⁶The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

⁸“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ ¹⁰So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and 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 wedding clothes. ¹²He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

¹³“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

¹⁴“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

AMEN????

Years ago, when Sam, who was our liturgist last week, was just in kindergarten, we told Luke's version of this story in Children's Church. I taught that day, and the model of Children's church at that time was one of offering a Bible story using simple wooden characters and inviting the children to simply ask questions and wonder about the meaning.

The Sunday was Super Bowl Sunday, and it seemed like a really great time to tell children a story about a big party.

"Wait," Sam said, "You mean that it was like someone was having a Super Bowl party with pizza, and soda (he may have said pop since he's from the mid-west!), popcorn and candy? And people didn't want to come?" "What?"

What indeed.

A monarch is throwing the biggest, best wedding party for their child. The guest list includes, we presume, all the big-wigs in the town... those a "whose-who" might want to have at the party. But for any number of reasons, those folks decline this invitation. (Remember, in real life, this would never happen.) So, the ruler sends their servants to assure the guests that the party will be awesome. They will be blessed to attend. And the guests treat the emissaries with disinterest and even violence.

So, the ruler opens the doors so that anyone and everyone can come in and eat the feast. Roast beef – maybe there was even tofu for the vegetarians – wine, fruit, the very best food, drink, dancing, and entertainment. This is a celebration.

This over-the-top story is not lost on those in religious power. But it's broader than that. Jesus may be relaying the biblical history of the Law and Prophets, how they, too were rejected, and equating that with the rejection of Jesus himself. It's yet another illustration of the gospel's

insistence on Jesus' concern and inclusion of those society considers outsiders. Luke's version of this story includes the poor, the blind, the lame and disabled, which goes along with the Lukan stories of God's preferential option for the poor and outsider.

Professor Anna Case-Winters writes, "The banquet now taking place... is not a banquet for the selected few, not for the social elite, not for the politically powerful, not for the religious insiders. These people have boycotted it. And now it has become a banquet for the people – outcasts and strangers." That must have felt shocking for those in power.

At the end of the first century, Matthew's community is in conflict with the synagogue and this story may be a vehicle for thinking about the meaning of that conflict. It isn't a matter of Christians vs. Jews as has been used, historically, to promote anti-Semitism, but an internal conflict within Judaism. This early Christian community would have thought of themselves as responding positively to Jesus, the Messiah. But others had rejected the great invitation, including both the prophets of old and current messengers of the Good News.

But why would this ruler need to destroy the city when the original invitees rejected the invitation? Matthew writes after the destruction of the temple of 70 AD. His community would have had this in mind when the story was told, so maybe it serves as an illustration of the judgement of those who rejected the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

And then, there's a mini parable within the story. A guest at the banquet arrives without the proper attire. The partygoer is addressed as "Friend," and the King asks, "how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" Of course, he wouldn't have a robe, he was invited in from the streets! And the host of that party sends him out where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Some friend!

Another Sam moment.... what?

Apparently, there are long standing debates among interpreters about what's going on here. Remember, this isn't a realistic story.

The reformers, John Calvin and Martin Luther, thought that wedding clothing might be a metaphor for faith expressed in works of love. So, Jesus, via Matthew's words, was critiquing those faithful followers who were not living into the life to which they were invited.

This guest wanted entry into the banquet on their own terms; a little like talking the talk without even trying to walk the walk.

Jesus' invitation to us is for the whole of our lives, he asks us to be "all in." To boogie down, to feast, to love with abandon. This wedding garment may be a little like the apparel the Apostle Paul writes about in Colossians, when he says, "Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[1] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

“(Colossians 3: 12-14)

The invitation to follow Jesus means that we are always learning and growing. Faithful living involves remaining open, curious about God and being willing to listen deeply to the voice of God in people and places long silenced.

And grace abounds. I'll say that again... grace abounds.

In the next week or so we will submit our commitments to support Oak Grove through our financial giving. Of course, we understand that stewardship is not a week, or even a season, but a life-long spiritual practice of expressing our faith through caring for the world and sharing

our treasure, our time, talents, gifts and service. Our lives and our stuff belong to God, and we are simply caring for it in the most faithful way we can.

Because of Christ's invitation, Christ's claim on our lives, Oak Grove take seriously our call to extend extravagant welcome. We are committed to using our resources to contribute to the thriving of the earth and her people, near and far. We are committed to being a place of invitation and welcome, of radical hospitality and outreach. A place of feasting and praying, of celebration and support, of music making and merriment, a place of lament and community and racial, environmental and economic justice.

It is a difficult time in the world. We witness the innocent suffering, and the worst of our humanity often seems to be on display. It is tempting to give in to despair and wonder what difference we can make. Now, more than ever, Christ's invitation to deep humanity, kindness, compassion, love and welcome are called from us.

And we are not alone. It's Christ's party after all. A place of abundant life, where there's always enough love to go around and more than enough to share.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-7>

<https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/weekly-seeds-filled-from-the-streets/>