

Matthew 22:1-14

22:1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

22:2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

22:3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

22:4 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.'

22:5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business,

22:6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

22:7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

22:8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

22:9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

22:10 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.

22:11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,

22:12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless.

22:13 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.'

22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

Sermon: A Different Invitation

I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. The Revised Common Lectionary offers us a challenging text this morning. I'm not sure I can make you feel warm and fuzzy about this text, but I do believe we can all leave here today unafraid of an end-of-times boogie man. Here goes:

Jesus is continuing his dialogue with a crowd, which includes the chief priests and Pharisees. He's now told them two consecutive parables, or provocative, subversive stories – the kind that make the overly-privileged and the underly-righteous uneasy – and the chief priests and Pharisees want to see him arrested. But they don't act, at least yet, because they know Jesus is revered by the masses as a prophet.

Jesus takes the opportunity to share a third, more pointed and provocative parable. Last week, it was a story of a vineyard owner and tenants; this week it's a story of a king and wedding guests. I want to pay particular attention to the actions of this king, because, frankly, he's not very kingly.

If you remember last week's parable, the landowner or Lord is a provider for his people, and by all accounts honors his social contract. He also shows remarkable restraint toward tenants who fail to honor their end of the bargain: to share in the harvest.

But this week's king shows neither restraint nor a real conviction toward his social contract. Here's the first clue: he's throwing a wedding party for his son, the prince, and nobody wants to come. Nobody wants to come to the royal wedding? Listen, I know the Windsors aren't the most popular they've ever been, but if I get an invite, I'm going to Westminster Abbey. And even if I don't, I'm watching coverage on the Today Show.

Something's amiss. In normal circumstances, clients do not dishonor their patrons without good reason. It seems the king expects the presence of his subjects, commands it even, while not having done any of the relational work to earn their mutual respect.

The king sends his servants with invitations to the community leaders. They decline. The king makes a second invitation, and the leaders decline again, the second time showing even more disinterest and disrespect, going so far as to seize, mistreat, and kill the second envoy of servants. Unlike last week's Lord, this king will not show restraint. He sends his troops to murder the offenders and burn their city.

And this of course creates a new problem. The king must now find a second set of guests to attend the feast in order to save face. And he's not gonna be discerning with the invitations. The servants are told to recruit everyone, good, bad, or indifferent to his purpose.

And then we get this strange, gruesome twist at the end. Among this new slew of filler is someone who didn't adhere to the dress code. The king feels disrespected, disgraced even. And he's speechless. He has his servants bind this person's hands and feet, and discard them into a darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth, and I would assume no broadband or cellular service either. Just utter emptiness.

And for the cherry on top, we receive a pithy summary: "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Okay, let's work to unpack this. Last week's parable was a commentary on the tenants. Jesus criticizes Israel's religious establishment for its continued refusal to share the divine fruit they have been called to distribute. And the chief priests and Pharisees are warned that the day is coming when their leadership will be replaced with one that chooses to live out God's good purposes.

This week, we've got the opposite. This story juxtaposes the reign of empire with the reign of God. Jesus criticizes a Lordship that abandons covenant. We, as believers, ought to see immediately that this king represents Caesar and Pharaoh and worldly leaders who lack the capacity, the patience, the wisdom, and the affection of YHWH. Hard stop.

Nevertheless, God, like any ruler, does have an expectation for people to be accountable and responsible. When the king in this story resets the guest list to include somebody, anybody, and everybody, there is a likeness to the invitation of the God we serve. There is a standard that befalls everyone regardless of privilege, station, or position.

But the expulsion of the guest, and especially the reason for expulsion, betray any similarity between God and king. Our God is not vindictive, is not overly violent, does not withhold grace in decimal point fashion. So big is God's grace, so much is God's concern for Creation, so strong is God's love for us, that God embodied us, in the lived presence of Jesus, to better understand the human experience. God bears our joy and pain, our hopes and failures with us. God, like a parent for child, longs to see our realized potential, and stands ready as a constant resource to that endeavor.

We know the garment we are to wear: Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your strength, and all your soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. God will send us as many invitations to do so as is necessary, no matter how clumsy or precise we are. God is confident in our ability and potential to become whom we are intended to be.

Consider the source of this text. Matthew's community lives in volatile times. Hard times. Smothered by Rome's oppression; marginalized from mainstream Jewish communities and losing their sense of connection and belonging to what had been; they are anxious about grasping, receiving, and experiencing God's good news before it's too late.

I'd simply say to you, that there a million ways to invite people into the story of God, and into the seeking of God's kin-dom. Matthew's author offers this invitation, and most invitations, with an urgency and alarm befitting his circumstances. I believe it's done in a way to scare believers into a sense of assurance and salvation. Think of the scolding way we might tell a child not to touch a hot stove. Our concern for an outcome leads to a sharp and pointed response. But I will tell you that I don't believe Matthew's form of invitation is as effective as others. I don't believe God is here to scare us into salvation, nor to offer the singular choice of turning or burning. I believe God is here to help love us into our full potential. And yes, there may be a day when each of us stand in judgement, when our commitment to covenant is reviewed, but that moment won't be flippant, nor rigid, nor without infinite chances for grace and mercy. God's patience is never urgent or fleeting, never reduced to our smallness, or even to our wildest imagination. God isn't ever worried about losing face. God is infinitely concerned with welcoming us home.

I offer this invitation, not in competition or contradiction to Matthew's gospel, but simply as another believer, as a member of this faith community, seeking to share a gospel truth that resonates through my own lived experience in our shared life together.

Finally, there's a word about the many who are called, and the few who are chosen. On the surface, I believe this phrase is intended to highlight, one final time to the chief priests and Pharisees, their failure to share in God's harvest, and their dereliction of duty as stewards for every created being.

But I can't help but hear this a second way. I'm thinking of that expelled guest, the one banished because they lacked proper attire. I know, without a doubt, that God calls each one of us, no matter who we are, to a life of potential. I also know that God calls each of us by name. And I know that when we hear God speak aloud our name, we embody the Spirit of Christ.

But it sure feels like the chosen in this statement are the ones whom we decide aren't called by God's universal love; the ones whom we choose to dismiss as unworthy participants in the feast; the ones whom we, like the builders, deem unsuitable for cornerstone work. Is there any chance that it's our neglect, our apathy, our utter lack of creativity that sends our neighbors into this sense of separation? Have we chosen to follow kings bent on expulsion rather than creators who welcome inclusion, because it's just easier, and safer, and financially viable?

Further still, could it be that the disconnection, the darkness, the weeping of this story are all symptomatic of what we'll continue to experience until that day when we really, truly make room everyone at our tables? Is the story asking us to give careful consideration to our choices? For how often to do we assume we're wearing the mantle of protagonist, when in reality, we've made the choices of villain. And how long can we stay at fancy feast in those shabby clothes?

These are heavy questions. But they needn't be lonely. And they needn't be overwhelming. And they needn't be without faith, hope, and love.

A Different Invitation

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Friends, there are fields to plow, vineyards to harvest, brides and grooms to celebrate. We've all got a part to play. And there's a loving God that offers us plenty of space to get there. May the wide space of that grace serve inform our invitation to God's community. And we may we make the wear the robes of righteousness, empathy, and collaboration.

May it be so. And may it be soon! Amen.