

10-11-26 sermon

Matthew 22.1-14

As we approach the end of another church year, we're at the point in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the final time. He's responding to his critics by telling parables – and this one is a doozy! Anyone feel a little uneasy by the time I'd finished reading it? We're more than happy for Jesus to critique the elite class while creating a community of unconditional acceptance among the poor. So, when we hear about this king who gets snubbed *by* the elite and who responds with violence, sending his troops to kill them and burn their cities, we might think, "that's a little harsh," but we're probably not going to lose any sleep over it. Then we hear that he fills his banquet hall with whoever his slaves could find, "the good and the bad," and that sounds exactly what a God who loves unconditionally would do.

Except.

Except *then* we hear that he comes across someone not wearing a wedding robe, and the king instructs the attendants to "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And *that* does not sit quite so comfortably with us, I suspect. So – what are we to make of this parable?

As I said, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem for the final week of his public ministry at the end of which he will be executed by the empire, at the request of the temple elite, publicly. No doubt it would have been livestreamed, if they'd had the technology. Jesus' teaching in the city this week is mostly in parables, just as his teaching in the countryside was also mostly in parables. As Matthew told us back in chapter 13, "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing." When he was with the rural poor, Jesus told parables about seeds. Fields. Trees. Farmers. Things that made up the substance of his audience's life. But now he's in the city, with a very different audience, so his parables concern wealthy landowners, and vineyards and – now – a king. Things that reflect his audience here, as the elite confront him daily in the temple, following his prophetic act of flipping over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, upon his arrival. When he returned the next morning, the chief priests and the Sadducees are waiting for him and demand, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" "Because clearly it wasn't us, and you're in *our* house now." Jesus says, "Let me ask *you* a question, and if you can answer it, I'll answer yours. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Check mate, as they quickly realized. "If we say, "From heaven," then he'll ask, "then why didn't you believe him? But if we say, "Of human origin," well – we're already afraid of the crowd, and they regarded John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." And Jesus responded, "Well then, neither will I tell you by what authority I'm doing these things." And then he begins a series of three very pointed parables, aimed squarely at his critics.

The first is about two sons, whose father, a wealthy vineyard owner sends out to work. After telling it, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the

kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn't believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. And even after you saw that, you did not change your minds and believe him." "Didn't like that one? Well, here's another." And Jesus tells a parable about another landowner who plants a vineyard, leases it to some tenants, but when he sends slaves to collect the rent, they beat them, stoned some, and killed another. The landowner sends his son, thinking, "Surely they'll respect my son." But when he arrives, they have a quick side conference, "This is the heir: if we kill *him*, we'll get his inheritance." So they do. "Now," asks Jesus, "what do you think the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants." They already know – as this is a parable they can probably quote from memory. One the prophet Isaiah employed against the *nation* of Israel. Now Jesus employs it against the *elite* of Israel.

Matthew ends this interaction by saying, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet." And so we arrive at this morning's passage. "Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven can 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.'" As we've observed before, the primary organizing factor of social life in the first century was honor and shame. Honor was a limited good – if someone rose in social class, it was always at the expense of another, especially among the elite class. Public banquets were common, and a way to reinforce the host's social standing. Invitations were delivered, then a list of those invited would be posted publicly. Those who were invited would read it carefully to make sure there was no one on the list they shouldn't dine with. For a major banquet such as this one, the exact timing of the meal was a moving target. So guests would be instructed to keep a couple of days open, so that when the meal was finally ready, they would be summoned to come: "dinner is now served."

So, the king puts on this elaborate wedding banquet for his son – *the* social event of the year. You would never decline *this* invitation. But when the slaves go out to call people to come, "they would not come." The verb is a participle – literally meaning, "they kept refusing to come." When the slaves return to inform the king, he sends other slaves, with a mouthwatering description of the feast, which is getting cold. This time, "they made light of it," some invited guests leaving the city for their farms or to check on their business interests, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them." Everyone in the crowds listening to this, knows what it means. If a few people refuse to come, that's one thing.

But if *everyone* refuses to come, that's a conspiracy.

They've obviously conferred, and decided to insult their host collectively. An unimaginable insult, but again, everyone knows exactly what Jesus is saying, because they've seen the insults and rejection the ruling elite have heaped on Jesus. And so we read, "The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city." (It's quite

possible Matthew added that last detail as he was composing the Gospel, because he wanted to draw a line between what Jesus was saying in this parable and the destruction of Jerusalem following the siege of Jerusalem, almost 40 years later.) The audience would applaud the king's action, *except*, of course, for those who already felt themselves the object of its lesson. Honor is partly restored by punishing those who insulted him in such a public manner. But to further restore his honor, the king must fill his banquet hall, to ensure the feast is enjoyed before night falls, and the food begin to spoil. The word used for "banquet" here describes a *midday* meal, and so when Jesus talks about darkness outside (or "outer darkness") at the end of the parable, that's probably literal as well as figurative. So the king sends his slaves out again, this time saying, "Go into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." They went out and gathered all they found – both good and bad – and finally the banquet hall is filled with guests.

And that's where we'd prefer the parable to end.

The elite getting their comeuppance, and the urban and rural poor, ordinary folks, "the good and the bad" alike, getting a seat at the banquet. But Jesus continues. Because when the king comes in to greet his guests, he spots someone not wearing "wedding garments." Most commentators don't think this expression refers to specific clothing. Rather it simply refers to clean garments, as opposed to soiled garments. People had at least put on clean clothing for the occasion. But this one guy had not done so, which was an insult, and as we've clearly seen, *this* host is in no mood to *be* insulted. So he asks him, "Friend..." Which casts our minds back to the parable of the day laborers a few weeks ago. Because that's how the owner of the vineyard addressed those hired first who complained about his treatment of them. "Friend, how did you get in here without wedding garments?" And the man has no answer. Because there's none he can give. It's not like he misunderstood what the invitation required of him. The king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And then Jesus concludes by saying, "For many are called, but few are chosen." Which sounds like something a Presbyterian might say!

So, what *are* we to make of this parable?

On one hand, the Good News is that God is always sending messengers out to the wrong parts of town to tell everyone to come and join the party! But on the other hand, if you show up in the wrong clothes, you'll get kicked out.

On one hand, the 'riff raff,' the 'nobodies' – those who thought they'd been forgotten by God – and certainly by the elite – receive an invitation to the palace. On the other hand, "many are called, but few are chosen." The Good News is that even the tax collectors and sex workers have seats at the king's banquet. The not-so-good news is that they have to show up wearing the right clothes.

From the very beginning of the Gospel, first with John the Baptist, then with Jesus, the call to discipleship is simple: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven – and the king himself – has drawn near." John continued, "So bear fruit in keeping *with* repentance."

If you like, “put on your wedding clothes.”

And what are *they*? They’re the sum of Jesus’ teaching, of which Jesus warns in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ – just as he does at the end of this parable - “The gate is narrow, and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are *few* who find it.”

“Many are called, but *few* are chosen.”

So, before you and I can take our seat at the banquet table, we have to discard our soiled clothes, exchanging them for new ones. We have to repent. To turn from our own ways, and begin to walk the Way of Jesus. Yes, God seeks us out and finds us in all kinds of places, wearing all kinds of soiled clothes. But they must be discarded if we are to receive God’s hospitality at the banquet, so that we might find ourselves among the “few” who respond to the call with repentance. Out of the many who are called, but who are very comfortable in the clothes they’re wearing. With the life that they’re living. Those who wear the garments of empire, not of the kingdom of heaven. The soiled garments of racism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, self-righteousness, rage, greed, contempt or apathy towards the vulnerable.

May we become increasingly willing to be clothed in the righteousness of God, bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which Paul describes as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The clothes we put on for the wedding banquet to which all are invited. May it be so.

Amen.