

A Proper 23 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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Matthew 22: 1-14

Whenever you find yourself in a large-group setting, do you ever ruminate about whether you feel like an insider or an outsider to the group?

Do you ever reflect upon your human agency in that moment, whether you are in charge of your actions and decisions or whether you feel pulled along by some group dynamic?

If you put your human agency feelings in dialogue with God's divine agency, is God calling the shots—aka, divine determinism—or are you in charge of the moment, even when you decide to follow Jesus?

Whether you ruminate too much on these existential issues or perhaps would benefit from such reflection—I invite you to enter the hot mess of Matthew's parable about the wedding banquet

Today's parable comes as a string of three parables Matthew has sewn together focused on doing or rejecting God's will for our lives

Along with the parables of the two sons and the tenants in the field, today's story addresses the distinction between those who do the will of the father/king/landlord and those who do not

If you see the parable's king as a metaphor for God, it begins on an upbeat note of God's gracious invitation to join the wedding feast

How awesome is that? Talk about a gift on a silver platter!

Who would turn down an invitation to the town's hottest ticket that includes sumptuous food and drink?

But for reasons unknown, the townsfolk blow off the king with lame excuses equivalent to: "I need to clean my aquarium"

Worse yet, the invitees seize the king's slaves, mistreat them and murder them as an ultimate act of disrespect

So one group of courtiers blows off the king and kills his slaves

Enraged, the king fights back, smites his foes, and goes to Plan B, requiring his surviving slaves to head out on to streets to recruit the good and the bad—a wonderful phrase—the respectable and the riff raff to fill the banquet hall

Let me stop here and ask with which character you identify most

Is it the king himself, who wants to call all the shots, only to get no respect?

Is it the first group of courtiers who spit in the face of authority?

Is it the slaves, who must do someone's dirty work in killing and recruiting?

Is it the respectable person in the street who is ambivalent about being on the B list?

Or is the riff raf who comes to the tuxedo wedding in Bermuda shorts?

It would be a fascinating exercise to section off our worship space and ask you to report to the group with which you most identify

In our Wednesday study group, we discussed Matthew's context that he addressed a Jewish community struggling with its alliance to old-school Judaism vs the embryonic Church of first-century Christianity

Awkward family dinners, attempts to walk both sides of the spiritual street, and demands for allegiance for old or new forms of worship shredded the social fabric of Matthew's community

Matthew clearly sided with the new church and stared down those who failed to see God's new hand at work in the world

Amid a frayed community, where do I stand as someone who makes decisive choices, tries to split everything down the middle, or muddles through with hope that it will turn out ok?

Who are my conversation partners, where do I find safe space, and am I an insider or an outsider?

The more things change, the more they stay the same

Let me break it to you gently by stating that we live today in a deeply divided culture where anger has become the rage

While some of us look forward to upcoming holiday family events, others would rather be boiled in a vat of oil

When crazy talk envelops us, we sometimes de-escalate and find common ground, while other times we need to draw a line in the sand

In today's fractured world, intensifying as we move toward a midterm election, what can we take away from this stressful parable that points ever so subtly toward reconciliation and harmony, escaping, as Matthew puts it, the outer darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth?

I find solace and energy in the kingdom of heaven that starts the parable, a place that we can dwell right here and now by God's gracious invitation

God continuously and graciously invites us into relationship, gives us paths toward reconciliation when we fall short, and points us toward the 'kingdom of heaven' which is the punch line of the parable

The New Testament invokes the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven (synonymous) some 100 times across all the NT, so this vision of reconciliation and harmony pervades scripture

Yes, we have this pesky challenge of humanity's screwing up that we need to take seriously—this week we struggle culturally with moral failure amid frat culture and sexual violence

Even in the midst of horrific moral choices, we always remain hopeful but never naive about our common human condition

But restored relationship with God and another remains the gold standard to which we strive in our personal lives, as a parish family and—I hope—as a culture

As we strive to move in this direction, we do well do ponder the final phrase of the story: Many are called, but few are chosen

To me, these sound more like Matthew's words than those of Jesus

It's an awkward conclusion that likely reflects Matthew's frustration with smug insiders who have become judgmental while losing sight of self-examination, who have become self righteous and a bit lazy in the ways of self-transcendence and transformation

Matthew deeply understands that following Jesus involves both promise and command, a promise of redemption and a command for repentance, self-examination and service to the world

It's easier to bask in the glow of fuzzy spirituality than to follow God will for justice and witness to a new kingdom on earth

So we keep at it, week after week, year after year

We do so in our private prayer life, as we seek vision, obedience and inspiration

We do so as a parish family, viewing the church as a hospital for sinners and cauldron of redemption

We proclaim a kingdom of justice and peace to a world seemingly bent on grievance and rage

Through our baptismal covenant, we celebrate that God delights in us and chooses us for service to the world—good news that we embrace with humility > arrogance

In a world that flirts with the outer darkness, let's shout from the rooftops about God's healing light

In this spirit and by God's gracious invitation, let's click our heals on the way out of church, singing "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine..."