

## The Banquet

Did you hear that parable? I'm very tempted to ignore it or at least clean it up *a lot* in the re-telling of it. I looked through my past sermons and I have actually done that with this parable – at least twice.

But...I just can't do it today because you heard it and I heard it and if we are doing anything of value here on a Sunday morning, we have to at least be honest. So what we heard is:

Jesus told a parable about a king who sent out invitations to his son's wedding. So far so good, but it all goes bad from here.

Those who were invited decided not to attend **and** some of them even roughed up and killed some of the king's messengers. The king was **enraged** and sent an army to kill them **and then to really show them who was really in charge**, he burned down their whole city!

Then the king told his slaves to go out and invite anybody and everybody- good, bad, he didn't care – just fill the place with guests. As one Lutheran pastor said, "Knowing what he did to the last invitees, would you turn him down?"<sup>1</sup>

Now the wedding hall is filled and just when you expect to hear "and they lived happily ever after" - the king notices one man, one single man in the crowd who was not wearing a wedding robe. He went up to him and said, "Friend, (in a not very friendly way), how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man was speechless. Then the king had him bound hand and foot and thrown out into the darkness to weep and gnash his teeth.

Jesus began this parable by saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a banquet for his son...." Don't you want to ask Jesus, "How exactly can this be compared to the kingdom of heaven?"

Usually preachers do the best they can with this parable. We say, "Well, the kingdom of heaven is *like this* in that it is all inclusive – the good and the bad are invited -that includes us and that includes everyone we think shouldn't belong– that's how gracious God is. And we suggest that the piece about the guy not

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you God for Paul Nuechterlein [http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper23a\\_2008\\_ser/](http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper23a_2008_ser/)

wearing the wedding garment is meant to remind us not to be complacent – showing up is not enough – we need to try to live lives worthy of the kingdom.

I guess those are decent enough gleanings from this parable, but that interpretation involves a lot of glossing over inconvenient details, don't you think? What about the enraged king who retaliates with vengeance against those who don't accept his invitation, burns down a whole city in anger and sends someone out to be tortured? How can that be compared to the kingdom of heaven? Are we to conclude that God is vengeful and violent?

There is another way to read this parable and that is to see that Jesus is not saying the kingdom of heaven is like the king in this parable – he says it can be compared to this king – and we know that comparing also always involves contrasting: the king in this parable is a very earthly king – a ruthless dictator who would be very familiar to Jesus' audience – King Herod, anyone? But compare him (or contrast him) with the man who is not going along with the festivities, the man who is not wearing the wedding clothes, is speechless in response to the king who then has him bound and thrown out into the darkness to suffer. That's a big difference.

What we need to remember is that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells this parable when he is already in Jerusalem, in just a few *days* he will stand speechless before Pontius Pilate, the imperial power, and then he will be bound hand and foot to the cross where he will weep and gnash his teeth.

So, if we want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus is telling us— don't look to the rage-filled, violent and vengeful king with an army at his side – that is the kingdom of this world – there is nothing new there; instead look at the unarmed, speechless man who is bound and cast out into the darkness. In other words, Jesus is saying, “If you want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like - look at me. Learn from me.”

We do not want to see Jesus as the bound outcast who is suffering and weeping and gnashing his teeth but he wanted us to see him that way. And that is surely what he became on the cross – the bound outcast who was suffering and weeping and gnashing his teeth.

Something happens when we see Jesus in this parable as the person who dared to defy the tyrant and because of that was singled out, exposed, and abused. What happens is that we start to see the courageous people in our world who will call out the bully and we start to see the people who are singled out, exposed and abused.

Because Jesus identified with them in this parable – and on the cross he *became* them – we cannot **not** see them anymore.

We begin to notice outcasts, we begin to notice people who are singled out and mistreated for not wearing the right clothes or the right skin or the right papers. Our sympathies begin to shift: we find ourselves not so worried about the king's wedding banquet and what to wear to it and more worried about how we will tend to the guy that was thrown out, to the woman who was abused, and to the kid who was put to shame.

That is how the Word of God works on us, converting us to a new way of seeing and a new way of living – more courageous and more compassionate.

There **is** a banquet for us (point to the altar) but it is not the banquet of the rage-full king; it is the banquet of the Good Shepherd; it is the banquet of Jesus who is gentle and humble in heart; it is the banquet of God who intends to wipe the tears from every face and swallow up death forever. Come as you are to this banquet. And expect your heart to grow in courage and compassion.

Thanks be to God.