



Squeezing the Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Matthew 22:1-14

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Martin Luther once said that sometimes you have to squeeze a biblical passage until it leaks the gospel.¹ This morning's Gospel lesson is definitely one of those texts. I have been squeezing this passage all week, wringing it out, shaking it out, turning it around, trying to squeeze the good news out of it. Finally, late Friday morning the light bulb came on.

It turns out that the opening line of the parable – “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to” – can be more accurately translated “the kingdom of heaven *has been* compared to.” Jesus is not saying that the kingdom of heaven *is* like this, but that this is how someone – maybe the chief priests, the Pharisees, the Herodians, or some other group active in Jesus' day -- has been describing the kingdom of heaven. Understanding that this isn't Jesus' idea of how the kingdom works but someone else's helps us see why so many things in the parable just don't add up. Guests invited to a royal wedding ignore the invitation, refuse to come, even abuse and kill the king's messengers. The king murders the murderers, destroys his own city, then turns around and invites street people to the banquet, which is still on despite the destruction going on around them, only to evict the one man who shows up without a wedding garment. The king in this parable actually behaves an awful lot like Herod the Great,² a human king everyone in Jesus' 1st century audience knew about.

Jesus tells this parable for the purpose of getting his listeners to think, to make them wonder: does God really behave like a human king? Will God really behave like mad King Herod who killed his own sons, and ordered the murder of Judea's leading citizens as he lay dying to ensure that someone would mourn his death?³ Jesus' parable invites his listeners to question and critique the way the kingdom of heaven has been described by someone else. Jesus invites his listeners to think critically about what someone else has been saying about the kingdom of heaven, to test their message against the scriptures to see if it measures up. As Jesus' 21st century listeners we are invited to do the same – to do a kind of fact-checking analysis of how someone other than Jesus has been describing God and God's kingdom.

¹ This quote is borrowed from David Lose at www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-17a-crazy-love.

² Thanks for this suggestion goes to D. Mark Davis, “The Kingdom of the Heavens vs the Kingdom of an Earthly King” at www.leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-kingdom-of-heavens-v-kingdom-of.html.

³ Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII.174.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven has been compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet. The comparison of God's kingdom to a banquet or feast is a tried and true biblical image, as we hear in this morning's reading from Isaiah: the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines (25:6).

Jesus says it has been taught that only a select few will receive invitations to this banquet. Is this true? To which we answer again: this morning's Hebrew Bible scripture says that God is preparing a feast for **all** people (Isaiah 25:6). The idea that only a few will be invited is false. The king's action later in the parable of sending his slaves to invite everyone, both the good and the bad, does line up with this scripture.

Jesus says someone has been preaching that those who refuse the invitation to the banquet will be punished and even killed. To which we can respond: this morning's scripture teaches that not only will God prepare a feast for all people, God will destroy the shroud of death that covers **all** people and wipe away the tears from **all** faces. God will save **all** the earth (Isaiah 25:7-9). So God seems to be in the business of saving the world, of destroying death and wiping away tears, not killing and destroying. It also stands to reason that the God who wipes away tears from all faces is not likely to have people tied up and cast into the outer darkness for wearing the wrong clothes.

Jesus says that it has been said, "many are called, but few are chosen." Yet our scripture says all are invited, and even in the bizarre story that he tells, everyone is called, no one is rejected, although some choose not to come to the banquet.

Fact checking this story that has been told about the kingdom of heaven shows that it gets mixed reviews. The idea that God prepares a banquet to which everyone – good and bad – is invited checks out as true. The ideas that God invites only a select group of people, kills them if they reject the invitation, or casts them into outer darkness for wearing the wrong clothes are not supported by other biblical texts like Isaiah. We can conclude that this story that someone else has been telling about the kingdom of heaven is in large part a misrepresentation. God does not behave like a mad human king bent on killing, torturing or destroying people. This is good news! Even better news is that God invites all people without exception to come to the banquet, to enter into an ongoing life long relationship with God in which we are transformed little by little from sinners to saints.

This story that misrepresents God and God's kingdom does, however, tell the truth about how people respond to God's invitation. Some guests didn't want to come. Others made light of the invitation, and went off instead to their farms and their businesses. Others were hostile to the invitation, abusing and even killing the messengers. One fellow showed up in the wrong clothes – that's gotta be a metaphor for something. Other things take the place of God in the lives of these persons. To the extent that those other things are not-God, they will ultimately not be able to deliver life and salvation.

Our responses to God's invitation are always mixed. In our adult learning series on *Treasure* we spent some time last week thinking about the many different "masters" that vie for our time, energy and financial resources. We shared how hard it is sometimes to choose where and how to spend our time, energy and money because often we are choosing not between one thing that is good and another that is bad. Often we are faced with choosing among things that are good – family, friends, work, hobbies, church. Yet, none of those good things is ultimately the source of life and salvation, however much joy and pleasure they may bring us.

We sometimes talk about trying to achieve some sort of balance between all these different aspects of our lives. But achieving and maintaining balance is a tricky business. The minute anything shifts everything is out of balance. Life becomes a teeter-totter. Some spiritual coaches suggest that we stop trying to find balance and work on being centered instead. We are asked to picture our lives more like a wind-chime with a center weight. The various elements of the wind-chime are in almost constant motion around that central point. Even as the wind blows the chimes every which way, they continue to produce lovely melodic and harmonious sounds.

The invitation to come to the banquet is a call to make Christ the center point around which everything else in our lives revolves because ultimately it is Christ – and Christ alone – who gives life and salvation. Centered in Christ, we begin to see our family, friends, work, hobbies, and yes – even the church – as gifts and blessings through which we are empowered to bless the world around us. Centered in Christ, we do not want, but instead discover we have enough time, energy and money to do God's work, and to share with those who are in need. Centered in Christ, we are freed to savor and enjoy green pastures and still waters where our soul is restored. Centered in Christ, we fear no evil not even the valley of the shadow of death because Christ goes with us, walking alongside, even carrying us through. Centered in Christ, we can face our worst enemies both those within us and those around us at that banquet table where our heads are anointed with oil and our cup overflows. Christ's grace and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives and bring us home to God's house forever. Amen.