

Year A Proper 23  
Exodus 32:1-14  
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23  
Philippians 4:1-9  
Matthew 22:1-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Matthew's gospel story today about the king and his wedding guests is another one of those "hard parables" that makes us uncomfortable—and that a lot of people like to dismiss. Digging into a bit will make it less dismissible. Let's see if it makes it more comfortable, too.

Remember that last Sunday we had the parable of the owner of the vineyard, and the evil tenants who ended up killing his son? This parable of the wedding comes immediately after that one. Remember, too, that Jesus is telling these stories to the chief priests and the Pharisees; so he is condemning them for their behavior, and for the fact that they don't believe in his messiahship. But, in a sense, Matthew is telling this story to **us**, so there is a double meaning here; we must hear both Jesus' message to the Jewish authorities, and Matthew's message to us.

This story is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, and it is an allegory, so each thing in it represents something else (at least one thing, sometimes more than one). We have a king (who is God) planning a wedding banquet for his son (Jesus), and he invites the guests that one would expect him to invite: God's chosen people, Israel. Remember, though that Matthew is telling this story to us, too—so **we** are the guests, as well. However, when the slaves are sent to gather the guests, the guests won't come. That is, the Jews are not interested in celebrating Jesus. Also, **WE** as Christians often don't answer God's call. The king sends his slaves out a second time (notice the king's grace and persistence in the face of his rejection) enticing his guests with descriptions of "my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves," but the guests "made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business." They (and we) have legitimate concerns, but have put them before God. The guests have created their own idols of their work, instead of worshiping God. Just as in the parable before this one, the wedding guests abuse and kill the king's slaves. Remember, these people have been invited to a **FEAST**, not a funeral. They have been invited into the joy of their lord's presence to celebrate with him, not to grieve. And abuse and murder are their response.

Now "the king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city." This reference is generally accepted to be to the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple in the year 70. Matthew is saying that was God's judgement on the Jews. Then the king decides, that since his chosen guests were unworthy, he will send his slaves into "the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." So the slaves bring everyone they find, "both good and bad" and fill the banquet hall. Notice that God's saving grace through Jesus is now being made available to everyone, the whole world, good and bad, and not just to God's chosen people Israel.

Now the king arrives to celebrate with them, but finds someone who is not wearing a celebratory wedding robe. The king addresses the guest lovingly, saying “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” It might be helpful at this point to know that it was a common practice for kings in the ancient near east to provide celebratory robes for their guests to wear. So this unrobed guest has decided not to wear what was given. When asked why, the guest has no answer. Then the king judges this guest to be unworthy, and has this person bound and thrown out into the “outer darkness” because “many are called, but few are chosen.”

Some of us might be offended that a loving God, a gospel God, would arrange for Jerusalem to be sacked, and its temple destroyed. Or that a loving God would, essentially, throw a person into hell. But Matthew is very clear that this **is** a loving God. God invites us to the banquet—to the joy of the wedding feast of the son, Jesus! God even gives us advance notice, a sort of “save the date.” Then, we are *personally* invited by God’s messengers. Then, even though we refuse the direct invitation, God, in patient love, sends word of the amazing food and preparations that have been made, wooing us, as it were, to come celebrate the wedding. It takes so much bad behavior on our part—ignoring God, mocking God, choosing our own occupations over the wedding feast, and then killing the messengers, to trigger God’s righteous anger. Even when God the king approaches the guest who is not properly dressed, it is kindly: the wayward guest is called “friend,” even in the face of the guest’s insulting rejection of the offered garment. And that garment—what does that garment represent?

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther said that it represents faith, which he says, “many will lack on Judgment Day. Without faith no one can remain at the wedding.” Luther also adds that faith “is active through love and does the *works* of love.” So the wedding robe represents faith in Jesus, and the resulting change in life that we should have as his followers. The guest who was not wearing the robe accepted the invitation to the feast, but that guest was unwilling to “put on Christ” unwilling to have faith, or to do the work of discipleship, of living a Christian life. Like that guest, many of us are called, but how many of us are “chosen”? By that I mean how many of us “put on Christ” by making the effort to follow Jesus, to do the hard spiritual work? There *are* hard choices involved in living a transformed, Christian life. It is a way of living that certainly flies in the face of so much that is valued in our society—both now, and back when Matthew was writing his gospel. But God is calling us to a joyful banquet, a celebration. Do we want to live in joy, and honor the king’s invitation to us? Or do we want to scorn God’s choice of us? Do we want to “put on Christ” or do we want to be clothed merely in ourselves and our own pride? My friends, the king has invited **us** to the wedding banquet. Let us join him, clothed in the garment of faith and discipleship that he offers.

Amen

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