

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25: 1-9
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 22: 1-14
October 11, 2020

“The Kingdom of God is Like . . .”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Jesus’ parables seem to be stories about ordinary things told in extraordinary ways. No one behaves as they ought to, and invariably everything goes wrong. At first we’re lulled along by the normality, but things quickly fall apart. The parable about the kingdom of heaven is no exception.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a king holding a marriage feast for his son. A wedding banquet is the perfect metaphor for the messianic banquet, and Jesus’ audience would have followed that logic. But since banquets took a long time to prepare invitations were typically sent in two stages. The invitation was sent out and acceptances received. Just as today having an exact number, or at least an almost exact number, was important for knowing how much food to buy and prepare. In the 1st century a second message would then go out to everyone letting them know when the banquet was ready and that it was time to go. It was understood that if you accepted the first invitation you were obligated to show up when the second message went out. A person who didn’t attend at the last minute wasted the host’s money. It was very disrespectful. Occasionally there may be an emergency and it can’t be helped, but for the most part, if you say you’re going to attend, you WILL be there. But in this story, when the second notice went out telling people that the banquet was ready the invited guests refused to come! They had no real reason other than that they were “busy.” One goes off to his field and another to his business. It was simply inconvenient. They weren’t engaging in criminal activity. They weren’t doing anything actually wrong. But they were using respectable activities to turn their backs on a king! They were making answering a royal summons to a banquet less important than whatever it was they had on their “to do” list. The rudeness and disrespect are breathtaking.

In Jesus’ parables characters rarely act as expected in real life. If the invited guest’s behavior was aberrant, the king’s was equally unusual, at least at first. After the guests had refused to come the king then then took the extra step of sending still more servants to tell them how wonderful everything was going to be, and to urge them to come. But still they paid no attention! Some of the invited guests even mistreated and killed the king’s servants who had been sent with the message. The king was furious. He sent his army, and destroyed the murderers and burned their city.

At this point we have a logic hiccup in the story. Apparently, the city is both destroyed and not destroyed, because more servants were sent out into the city after it was burned to the ground. You can’t expect a parable to be

entirely consistent. The king then instructed his servants to go to the street corners, the highways and byways, and invite anyone they find. So the servants went out and soon the banquet was filled with people, the good as well as the bad.

What does all of this mean? We know that later anti-Semitic interpretations asserted that the Jews were “those who were not worthy,” but Jesus never rejected his own people. There are some theologians who attribute these words not to Jesus, but to Matthew, as a way of explaining what was happening when this gospel was written in the 80s. The Temple was destroyed in the year 70 and there was increasing hostility between Jews and Jewish Christians at that time. But that makes a presupposition that I am not prepared to make. That idea has Matthew simply making stuff up! The stories Jesus told may not have been immediately written down, or when they were written down they were in simple collections without any context, but they were considered holy. An oral culture is not a “whisper down the lane and rewrite what you want” culture. An oral culture repeats stories word for word for centuries. While it might be possible to read IN a negative attitude towards Jews, Jesus was a Jew, and that does not fit with the original context in the original telling. Therefore “those who were not worthy” are NOT all Jews. Those who were not worthy were some, the some that we find in any time and place, the “some” who are too self-important to respond immediately and humbly when God calls.

One difference that we can find with the early synagogues and Temple worship of the day, however, is that EVERYONE was invited, the good and the bad. At that time people with bad reputations, any physical deformity or any mental disability were banned. This, too, is a very human thing. We can all think of churches that would look down their noses at a homeless person coming in to worship, or would be utterly horrified if prostitutes and drug addicts turned up, who would call the police to take them away. We all know of faith communities where only the “good” “clean” “respectable” and “prosperous” are welcome. The early Church would have had a lot of people the average synagogue turned away. But tragically, later churches have had their fair share of turning people away too, despite the fact that the invitation from the king is to all.

The message seems to be one of radical inclusion. But then a strange twist is introduced. We suddenly have a parable within a parable. We don't really know what to make of it. The king comes in to see the guests and notices a man not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, “How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?” But the man was speechless. At that the king told his attendants, “Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus added, “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Now, at the superficial level of story I think, “Of course he doesn't have proper wedding clothes! You just dragged him in off the street!” But that is not really the point. Putting on a garment in scripture is an image found in both Old and New Testaments for putting on a new nature. The prophet Isaiah says, “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,

as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” And the apostle Paul wrote often about “putting on Christ.” Furthermore, there is some thought that the host himself would have provided the wedding garments. God is the one who makes us righteous. Understanding these things what seems to be being said is that it takes more than standing in a church building or attending a Zoom service to be a Christian. Anyone can do that! People with ill intent could even do that. Pedophiles seek out places where there are trusting and vulnerable children. A corrupt businessman or woman might use church membership as a good cover to earn people’s trust. We have all heard about wolves in sheep’s clothing. So while I am initially tempted to feel sorry for this man, the king was not fooled. God knows the heart. God knows all of our hearts. The invitation is free, but we accept with our whole lives.

Isaiah’s vision of God’s heavenly banquet is a feast of rich food for all peoples. It is a time and a place where death will be swallowed up forever, where the Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces, and all human disgrace will be gone from the earth. Who would not want to be part of this banquet? But temptation comes in all forms to take us away from answering God’s call. We have work to do, errands to run, heaven help us—children to educate at home right now! The shopping has to be done, the house is dirty, the bills need to be paid. So we put God at the end—the very bottom of our “to do” list. And we all know what happens to the last item on the list, don’t we? Somehow, we never quite get to it. Jesus’ message is clear. When the king calls, answer. **We must not let what passes for life distract us from the real thing.** Amen.

Isaiah 25: 1-9

Lord, you are my God;

I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.

² You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.

³ Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

⁴ You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall

⁵ and like the heat of the desert.

You silence the uproar of foreigners;

as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.
6 On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.
9 In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Matthew 22: 1-14

22 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: **2** "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. **3** He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.
4 "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'
5 "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. **6** The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. **7** The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.
8 "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. **9** So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'
10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.
11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. **12** He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.
13 "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'
14 "For many are invited, but few are chosen."