

20th Sunday after Pentecost A 15 October 2023

Matthew 22:1-14

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Today, Jesus invites us to feast on The Parable of the Wedding Banquet. Let's pray: ...

If what we hear in today's gospel is really what the kingdom of heaven is like, then I'm deeply concerned.

How is God's kingdom – at least as Jesus describes it today – any different to the world today with leaders who abuse their power, when violence is perpetrated on a daily basis, when people's lives are being destroyed, when cities are burning, when people are made to believe they don't belong?

So let me ask you this. Does today's gospel fit with what you imagine the kingdom of heaven is like? Is the way Jesus describes the kingdom what you have in mind when you pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven?" And if it is, who are you praying that it be done to? Yourself or someone else?

This is a difficult and painful scripture. It seems as though something has been left unwritten, like there's something between the lines that we just can't read. There are just too many contradictions and inconsistencies to take it at face value.

If today's gospel teaches us anything, it's that we must do the hard work of listening with our ears, our hearts, and our minds to discern what Jesus wants us to know and apply to our lives.

Every word of scripture invites us to struggle with its application in our lives, and to work out our faith in light of that struggle. And that's what I want us to do with today's gospel. I want us to wrestle and argue with this gospel until it begins to take shape in a way that reshapes us.

Personally, I love the image of a wedding banquet as the kingdom. Joy, love, feasting, family, the unity of two becoming one. It's the kind of thing I want for all of us. It reminds me of Jesus performing his first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1). It's consistent with the prophet Isaiah where he says, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear" [25:6], and it echoes the psalmist saying that the Lord spread a table before him and filled his cup to overflowing (Psalm 23:5).

However, others don't seem to agree. The king sends messengers to sing out to those invited, "Dinner's ready. Let's get this party started." But some turn their back on the invitation while others murder the king's messengers. Then the king sends his army to destroy those who had been invited and burn their city to the ground. How's that for an image of the kingdom? Is that your experience of God? Do we want to be literalistic about "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23,24; Matthew 5:38)? Is that what we should teach our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren about God?

Is that what you pray for when you pray the Lord's Prayer? And if that's the kingdom, what do we do with "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13); "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:39); "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44), or Isaiah telling us that the Lord "will swallow up death for ever" ... and "wipe away the tears from all faces" [25:8]. There's got to be more to this story than a surface reading.

Next, the king sends messengers to invite anyone, everyone, good and bad as though to say, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, this feast is for you." And that matches all those stories about Jesus eating and spending time with "tax collectors and sinners," healing lepers, forgiving the woman caught in adultery, casting out demons, giving sight to the blind and life to those in the tombs.

That sounds more like God's kingdom, doesn't it? St Paul's endorsement rings out from today's epistle, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice ... The Lord is near ... Do not worry about anything" (Philippians 4:4-6). And Jesus says many times in the Gospels, "Do not be afraid"; "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10); "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27).

The kingdom is for everyone. No one gets left out. All's well. Sounds groovy. Yet, one bloke gate crashes the party and gets thrown into the outer darkness because he wasn't properly dressed.

Is there really a dress code for the kingdom? Why didn't the king give the poor guy a wedding robe? After all, doesn't Jesus teach us to welcome the stranger and clothe the naked (Matthew 25)? So, which is it: welcome and clothe the stranger or kick him out because he's wearing a pair of stubbies and a singlet?

On the surface, today's gospel confronts us with a collage of contradictions and inconsistencies: a wedding banquet and a blood bath; messengers bearing good news and murderers of those messengers; an enraged king who sends troops to destroy his own citizens and an open invitation to all and sundry. And then there's the thorny issue of the poor fellow chucked into the abyss.

Let's take a deep breath and break down this parable. I think this parable is all about a party and we're all invited. Every week everyone is invited to this wedding feast called "worship". Some choose not to accept the invitation because they apparently have more important things to do but that doesn't stop God, out of his graciousness, from persisting with his invitation. Then there are those who gather for worship on Sunday morning, and their time is anything but a celebration of joy. Rather, it's an hour of judgement and criticism. They don't come looking for grace, they come looking for performance, and they're often disappointed.

- Did the pastor say all the right things?
- Did the musicians hit all the right notes?
- Was the pew bulletin error-free?
- Did the children behave themselves?

Some refuse to see worship as a party. Rather, they see it as an obligation they should attend. Don't smile. Don't rejoice. Just sit there and look reverent.

And then there's the rest of us - the riff raff, who can sniff out a free feed from a mile away and know a good thing when we see it. We've latched on to the reality that God's kingdom is an eternal party and say "yes" to the King's gracious invitation. We know that the kingdom Jesus speaks of is festooned with love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, kindness, beauty, hope, and we sure don't want to miss out.

People kid themselves if they think that the King of creation should have anything to do with us. Why? Because we're unworthy sinners. Nevertheless, he graciously invites us to his party, and it's totally free and undeserved. He wants us to rejoice and be glad. But our King also wants to change us with his grace, and this is where this parable takes a dramatic turn at the end.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe." It doesn't mean that the man was wearing the wrong clothes; rather, that he was wearing the wrong attitude. He rejoiced at the party, but there was no humility about him. He was cavalier. He took for granted the king's astonishing hospitality. And so, he plans to live his life as usual, and expects to return to the party again next week for another free meal. This man wasn't properly clothed with humility, gratitude, or a willingness to be transformed.

And this is the truth about God's invitation to us to enjoy his party; he invites us to come as we are. However, he loves us too much to leave us as we are. He wants to change us, mould us, transform us into genuine children of the King. It's a lifelong process; but it begins with accepting his gracious invitation and continues with growth in gratitude humility, and a willingness to follow his ways.

To treat the gift of forgiveness so lightly is to flirt with the danger of "cheap grace" of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. But to leave this party every week, asking God to go with us into the messiness of our lives, and to lead us toward righteousness; that's the ultimate purpose of this parable and Jesus' interest in us.

Many are called, but you are chosen, Saints. So, accept God's gracious forgiveness, enjoy his sumptuous banquet, and let his love transform your hearts and minds.

May God give us courage to see ourselves in this story, and faith to receive his grace with joy. And then our worship will indeed be "a foretaste of the feast to come." All glory, honour, and praise be to our heavenly King. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ our Saviour King. Amen.