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Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Matthew 22:1-14

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***Matthew 22:1-14***

***1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so 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 a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14For many are called, but few are chosen.”***

The lectionary, the pre-selected three-year pattern of scripture readings that preachers often use for weekly sermons, gives us four choices of text for each week. Because I have been enjoying the continual readings in the gospel of Matthew, I didn’t even pay attention any of the others for this week.

I could have chosen Psalm 23, which brings a smile to everyone’s face as we picture ourselves beside still waters, reveling in daydreams of pastoral scenes. Or I could have chosen the reading from the letter of Paul to the Philippians, chapter 4 that repeats the phrase “Rejoice in the Lord. Again I say, rejoice in the Lord.” Such nice, calm, serene, comforting words – were right at my fingertips, and yet they slipped right past me as I made a bee line for the gospel of Matthew.

I only noticed Psalm 23 and Philippians later when I began to look for a last minute reprieve, a way around the task of working with the gospel text. But of course, where’s the challenge in that?

First, I’ll read the text once more, and include my running commentary this time.

*“Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables,*

Remember, the context of this parable is that it is **the third parable** in a row that Jesus says to the chief priests and temple leaders, after he has upturned the tables of the money changers. “The first parable focused on obedience to the will of the Father (21.23-27), the second built upon the rejection of God’s servants (21.33-46), and both of these included Jesus asking the temple leaders a question about how the God-figure will respond to the actions of the characters. With each of their answers, the leaders condemned themselves.”1

*2“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.*

At first, the king seems to be a benevolent king, inviting many to the wedding banquet that has been lavishly and generously spread. When those that were invited were called to come, they kind of came up with a bunch of excuses. The king’s feelings seemed kind of hurt, and maybe he started to feel like, well, I’m the king, they are supposed to want to come to this banquet. He even explains how lavishly he has gone to the trouble. He sends the slaves out again to implore those that had been invited to come.

*5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.*

Ok, woah. It’s one thing to blow off the invitation, and no small invitation at that! But some of the invited guests actually seized the slaves, mistreated them, and killed them! That’s way over the top! This parable has gone sideways very early on. And it doesn’t get better. In the very next line, it says

*“7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.”*

You refuse to come to my party, kill my slaves, so if you won’t come to my party I will kill you? Is this outrageous vengeance what the Bible wants to teach us? Please tell me there’s something redeemable coming in this parable.

*“8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so 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 a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless.*

If the servants went out into the street and gathered all whom they found, how would any of them known that they would need proper attire that day? Of course the man was speechless. If these were people who were not expecting to attend the wedding banquet for the son of the king, why would they be dressed for the occasion? What about those who couldn’t afford proper attire?

*13Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

Wow. That’s harsh. Now is where we might expect some explanation of the parable from Jesus, explaining how the lack of proper decorum toward the king and the banquet did not call for all of that retaliatory violence, and how the kingdom of God wasn’t really like that.

But that explanation is not forthcoming in this parable. Jesus merely ends with, *“14For many are called, but few are chosen.”*

So that’s it? The kingdom of God is like this parable? Someone in power throws a party and invites people who are socially obligated to come; they rebel by making excuses for why they won’t come; when asked again, they kill the messengers. Then the king responds by destroying them and burning their city. Then the king decides to continue the party anyway, determined that his glorious party still have guests, and when the guests don’t appear in correct party wear, the king destroys him!

When I think about how the larger Church sets itself up as the moral compass for society, and at the same time some churches take scripture like we read today out of their own context and use it to become arbiters of justice – it’s infuriating. Without its context, this parable says that God is like this king, and therefore this kind of retribution and violence is appropriate, or God-sent. The horrors that the people of Israel and the people of Palestine are experiencing right now is a real-time example of this very thing. One radio report said that it was very short sighted to think that this conflict just began this past Saturday when Hamas attacked Israel. This conflict goes back at least as far as 1946, and land in all of the middle east has historical significance to many cultures, going as far back as we can imagine. According to Dr. Yasmeen Abu-Fraiha, a Bedouin doctor who has been treating the injured from one of the sites,  “the real dividing line is not between Israelis and Palestinians but between those who believe violence is the answer and those who believe there is another way.

So let us *not* remove this third parable from its context there in the temple and remember that Jesus is still talking to the temple chief priests. In this third parable there is no comparison between God and the king in the parable. The parable is not equating God with the king; the parable is equating the kingdom of God with the situation that the king is in. It is not a personal comparison, it is a situational comparison. In the kingdom of God, everyone is invited to the banquet the first time, and those who answer that invitation or that call, will produce fruits of the kingdom of God. If one is called and does not do the will of God, does not produce fruits of the kingdom, then that situation cannot be called the kingdom of God.

Parables and allegories are useful, but not complete when interpreting the parables of Jesus. Parables usually offer something subversive to the status quo as their message to us. Remember how I wanted some explanation of the parable from Jesus, explaining why what the king was doing was wrong. Instead of that explanation, Rev. Dr. Yung Suk Kim from Virginia Union University reminds us that, “The subversive message is that the position and authority of religious leaders/elites will not last forever because God will open a new door, break traditions into pieces, and continue his work through other people. The way of God is radical and revolutionary in that regard.”2

One other aspect of the context of this parable is that this parable is told in this way in the gospel of Matthew. There is another telling of this parable that is more gentle in the gospel of Luke. The gospel writer of Matthew stresses that the kingdom of God is open for all. That the kingdom of God depends on the fruits of our labors. For Matthew, answering the call of God, means to act in such a way as to produce the kingdom. If we think we have answered God’s call but not acted in a way to produce God’s will in the world, then we have not been chosen. We don’t get to put “Called By God” on a certificate that hangs on our wall. We put “called by God” in our hearts and our actions do the talking. Being called is a term that our denomination uses a lot. All of us are called, not just people who have ceremonies around the decision. You have been called by God to this particular church, to help us work for the kingdom of God in our world and in the larger world.

Amen.

1<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-10-09/matthew-221-14-3/> Chelsey Harmon

2<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-9> Rev. Dr. Yung Suk Kim

3<https://www.npr.org/2023/10/13/1205855983/a-rabbi-and-imam-on-how-theyre-counseling-their-communities>