

Matthew 22:1-14
The Parable of the Wedding Banquet
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*Poet, Robert Burns, begins his poem, "A Red, Red Rose," with this simile,

"O my Luve is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June."

Based on this description, can you tell me what his "Luve" is like?

Is his love better by the dozen?

Fresher if kept in water?

Prickly with thorns?

Will his love fade quickly as the flower wilts in the summer heat?

By using a simile or metaphor, a writer provides the opportunity for various interpretations, of course, some are certainly more desirable when you're talking about a love interest. Parables provide a similar opportunity for readers and listeners. Parables leave us with plenty to think about and sometimes with more questions than answers.

We've been talking the last few weeks about some of the parables the author of Matthew attributes to Jesus and much of our conversation has centered on interpretation. We've talked about what Jesus might have been trying to say to his original listeners, how the author of Matthew used the stories and what he might have been trying to say to his audience, and last, what these parables might mean to followers of Jesus today. Today's parable presents us with another opportunity to hear a new story in an old text.

Last week, Josh preached on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, which Matthew used as part of a teaching sequence on the way to Jerusalem. Between that parable and our text today, is the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We will go back and pick that story up in a few weeks on Palm Sunday. So now, Jesus is in Jerusalem, has cleansed the temple, and is already in the crosshairs of the Jewish leaders who were in cahoots with the Roman authorities. Matthew makes this clear in the two verses right before the story Rhonda read for us today. He wrote:

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

*Today's text is usually titled, "The Parable of the Wedding Feast." Similar stories are found in Luke 14 and in Thomas 64. While they have some similarities, clearly originating from the same original Jesus story, each author has created something different.

*Think of it like Mr. Potato Head. Did y'all play with Mr. Potato Head as children? If so, you know the essential part of the toy is the potato. The eyes, ears, nose, and mouth are interchangeable. Each child who plays with it has the potential to create a different image, but each image begins with the potato.

For the parables, then, we first need to locate the "potato" if we want to be responsible interpreters of scripture.

Dr. Bernard Brandon Scott, New Testament Scholar and author of *Reimagining the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, suggests the "potato," within our story today goes like this:

*A man was giving a big dinner and invited many guests.

At the dinner hour the host sent his slave to tell the guests:

"Come, it's ready now."

But one by one they all began to make excuses.

The first said to him, "I just bought a farm, and I have to go inspect it."

And another said, I just bought five pairs of oxen, and I'm on my way to check them out; please excuse me."

And another said, "I just got married, and so I cannot attend."

So the slave came back and reported these to his master.

The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."

Before we talk about the original parable, let's look at how Matthew used the story, noting his additions to the "potato." The story in Matthew is full of symbolism, beginning with the metaphor, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. So, this parable will tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like. The first guests invited to the dinner, the nobility, represent the Jewish people. It's important to note that being invited to a wedding banquet given by the King was about the greatest honor a person could receive in the world of the Roman Empire. That these 1st recipients would have chosen not to come, for rather mundane reasons, would have probably made Matthew's audience laugh. Who in their right mind would refuse an invitation to a wedding feast of a King where there would be all of that free food? What fools!

But the 2nd invitation would have generated a positive response. Like, okay, now the guests will accept the invitation like anybody would. Nobody would have foreseen the guests' attack on the servants who brought the 2nd invitation. That would have been shocking. However, the retribution that follows, as a result of rejecting the king and killing his servants, would not have raised eyebrows at all. That's how kings act when they are dishonored. There's another layer here to Matthew's story though. The destruction of the city wasn't just about an angry king. A little context is helpful. The author of Matthew wrote in the late first century, after 70 CE when Jerusalem was destroyed by the

Romans. So, this destruction of the city is a reference to that and is one of the clues Matthew gives the reader that there is a message under the surface in this story.

Moving on...with the A-listers destroyed, the king needs some guests so he doesn't look foolish. He instructed the slaves to go into the streets and invite everyone. These invitations gather "both good and bad" people, according to the text. And this would have been the second shocking thing about this story. Kings do not invite just anyone to their banquets. This hodge-podge gathering of people is symbolic of the church, which the author of Matthew viewed as a mixture of people some of whom are good and some of whom are bad. A few weeks ago, we talked about that when we talked about Matthew's use of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. Anyway, now the banquet is full of all kinds of people.

And our attention is drawn to the guest without the proper attire. If all of the guests are the church, this poorly dressed guest symbolizes the people who do not produce what Matthew considers good fruit. And those, according to Matthew, will be "thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In the end, Jesus' original parable, tweaked by this author, directed at his community of Jewish Jesus followers, becomes "an allegory of Jewish rejection, Christian acceptance, and final judgment." (Scott, *Reimagining the World*, 112)

So, I ask you, is this what the kingdom of heaven is like? Is the kingdom of heaven ruled by a king who decimates anyone who doesn't get on board? Does that king toss away all of us who don't produce goodness, with no chance to get it together?

Speaking only for myself, I say no. The kingdom of heaven isn't what's left after a scorching of the earth and my God is a God of love and second chances, not a God prone to writing us off. And, based on the

difference between Matthew's allegory and Jesus' original parable, I think Jesus would agree with me.

You see, the author of Matthew and Jesus told their stories a full generation apart from one another, and for different reasons. Matthew was trying to keep his community of Jesus followers focused on Jesus as the Messiah in the midst of a world that did not seem as if the Messiah had come and in the face of other Jewish voices saying, "No, he was not the one."

Jesus, on the other hand, was not trying to convince the people that he was the Messiah. He wasn't promoting himself, he was promoting a vision of a world that was very different from what his followers were experiencing; a world that was upside-down, a world where the first were last, and the lost were found. We have to remember that Jesus' parables need to make sense in Jesus' context, without any knowledge of how his followers came to understand him after the Romans killed him. The stories need to make sense not only to the ones who believed he was the Messiah, but to those who found him a wise teacher, a neighbor in Nazareth, or a fellow Jew, because his audience was made up of those people.

And, perhaps most importantly for us, the parables have to have something to say to us today, with new inspiration to fit our context. Otherwise, why spend our time studying it? Speaking again only for myself, Matthew's story is difficult for me to wrap my mind and heart around because my experiences of God have not shown me that God is a petty, one strike and you are out, kind of God. The allegory Matthew created doesn't make much sense in our world today.

*Or as Jewish New Testament scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, wrote in her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, "We cannot turn parables into platitudes" (p. 20, *Short Stories by Jesus*).

So, what was Jesus' story of the big dinner about?

It was about a vision of a world where money and power don't buy privilege or a seat at the table. It was about the inclusion of ordinary people in that which is extraordinary.

In the ancient Jewish tradition, one dominant view of the *olam ha-ba*, the "world to come," was of a banquet, a great feast at which one reclined at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The author of Matthew references this in chapter 8 when he tells a story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant. In the story, Jesus compared the faith of the soldier to the lukewarm faith of Israel when he says, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from the east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matthew is fond of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus' table story lampoons this image of the heavenly banquet. The banquet proposed by the host, who invited the A-list people, might have seemed like a fitting model for the anticipated banquet, but the actual banquet, according to Jesus, would be something else. Just as the parable of the Unforgiving Slave rejects the imperial model for the messiah, so this parable rejects banquets for the elites as the model for the messianic banquet. God's banquet is something else.

The banquet in Jesus' story is more like a summer backyard cookout than a carefully plated dinner at the country club. It includes both the ones who think they belong and the ones who are sure they don't. There is a seat at the table for the ones who have declined the invitation over and over and the ones who believe they have to do and say certain things to keep their seat. And, as I've said before, it's really messy. It's like the cookout where some of us have BBQ sauce on our faces and the kids are chasing each other and getting sweaty and dirty.

Including everyone is messy. But it's what we are called to, not because if we don't there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, but because our God is a gatherer. And there is nobody God does not wish to gather.

And very simply, in order to gather people, we have to invite them. We have to invite them to dinner in our homes, to accompany us to the symphony, to volunteer with us at Agapé, join us for highway clean-up, or celebrate new beginnings on Easter Sunday. I don't want to turn Jesus' parable into a cute little lesson about inviting people to church because that's not what it's about. It's about gathering people to be part of us. "Us" is a group of people who have committed to try to figure out what it means to truly follow the ways of Jesus, who believe in a world of equity and compassion, who are willing to work to bring about that world by serving our neighbors and this community, and who believe there is a place for absolutely everyone who seeks wholeness, and of course, we are convinced that love always wins. Invite people to be part of this.

*I will end by showing you this amazing picture I ran across this week. It's a picture of an event in Park City, UT called Savor the Summit. I've heard it's the largest outdoor dinner party in the country. It happens every summer in the downtown area of this community. Everyone is welcome at what they call "The Grand Table." I really, really love this image. This is what we are called to create in this world. This, friends, is the kin-dom of heaven. Amen.

