

The Parables According to Matthew, Part 10, Guests:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 20th 2017 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 22: 1-14

To begin by stating the obvious. This is a tough-minded parable...one that is likely to make us uneasy on numerous levels. If the behavior of the subjects of this King—the one throwing a banquet for the wedding of his son—if the behavior of those subjects who refuse his invitation to that banquet (and do great harm to the servants of the King who bear the invitation) doesn't produce at least a mild sense of puzzlement in us, we most certainly will register not only puzzlement but likely a fair degree of queasiness at the way in which this King responds, by having those subjects slaughtered and their village reduced to rubble. If at that point we breathe a sigh of relief, hopeful that the worst is behind us, this parable—which, recall, is offered as a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven!—if at this point we think things will henceforth go swimmingly, we are soon disabused of that hope. Oh yes: other guests are ushered in to take the place of those who turned down the King's initial invitation, but then—when one of those unexpected guests turns out to have ignored the operative dress code, that hapless guest (who, I suspect, by now had wished he had simply stayed home), is summarily led from the banquet and escorted to a place where *there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*. Even if we interpret that weeping and gnashing metaphorically—a hint of eternity spent in deep regret—it's a painful note on which to end a parable, especially one that began so promisingly, with the announcement of a wedding feast. And so yes: there can be no debating...no debating the fact that this is a tough-minded parable, the sort of thing some of us might have been just as happy to pass over rather than engage on a lovely summer Sunday. Then again...

There is no shortage of tough minded parables throughout the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Way back, two summers ago, when we worked our way through the parables found in what is likely the oldest of the three—Mark's Gospel—we noted that the Parable of the Sower is, in many ways, Jesus' foundational parable which, I suspect, explains why it can be found not only in Mark but also in Matthew and Luke. Remember what happens in the parable of the Sower, whose central character goes out to sow, but only some of the seed lands in good soil, soil on which it can happily flourish. The rest of the seed meets a much less happy fate, landing on rock, eaten by birds, scattered by wind. There's a sense, I think...a sense in which this morning's parable of the wedding feast translates that agricultural parable into an explicitly human context: in which the King's invitation to the feast fails to meet with universal success, just as the efforts of that sower failed to meet with universal success: with most of the intended guest failing to flourish, just as most of the seed failed to flourish. None of that is to deny the fact that it all seems much harsher when translated into a human scenario: a scenario that is hardly unique to this parable. On the contrary.

Whatever else can be said of the undeniable Jewishness of Jesus—the one who tells these parables—it is clear that his worldview is thoroughly stamped by the Hebraic tendency to resist the possibility of there being “neutral” ground in this life we live. The Biblical worldview is one that invites us to choose. In the immortal words of the book Deuteronomy, words spoken by Moses as the ancient Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan: *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.*” Choose life! Choose life with no compromise. That is at the very heart of the message that animates our scriptures, and the teachings of Jesus—including his parables—embody that message. And so subjects of the King who turn down the royal command to attend the feast are not just a little bit wrong; they have placed themselves entirely outside the orbit of the Kingdom. And a guest who shows up unprepared for the feast cannot simply be handed a tie, the way they might offer such a tie in a fancy restaurant to a guest who arrived minus a tie. No: that lack of preparedness is a radical failure that must be met with a radical rejection from the feasting and yes...by implication...from the Kingdom in which that feast is being held. There is no middle ground. In the world of this parable, you are either in or out; you are either a child of the Kingdom or you are estranged from the Kingdom. Nor is this the last time we will see that theme writ large in one of Christ’s parables! Quite the opposite is the case!

As I indicated in my write-up in this morning’s bulletin insert, we are done with Matthew parables...for now. On the final three Sundays of November, however, they’ll make a brief return: as we confront the three parables that comprise the 25th chapter of Matthew, just prior to Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion. In that remarkable 25th chapter, Jesus tells parables which—much like this morning’s parable—make it clear that there is no neutral ground. You are either a wise virgin or a foolish virgin; you can’t be a little bit of both. You are either the sort of servant who uses the talents entrusted to them...or you are the sort of servant who just buries their talent in the ground; you can’t play it safe, you can’t be a bit of both. And yes: you are either a sheep placed at the right hand of God, warmly invited into the Kingdom...or you are a goat placed at the left hand of God, shown the door with not so much as an if, and or but. These are radical parables...parables that seek to place before us a radical choice...parables offered to us by that most radical of Messiah’s: the one we call Jesus.

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My hunch...my hunch...is that it is easier to explain a parable such as this one...easier to explain it...than to know just what it means to live under its authority. And so, for starters—just as with last week’s parable, the parable of the two sons...

...for starters it is not hard to discern how well this parable fits within the context in which we find it in Matthew’s Gospel: a context in which Jesus is confronting the full force of resistance he was shown by the religious leadership of his time. After all, the parable depicts a King holding a wedding feast in honour of his son...but the invited guests have no interest in attending. That seems like a pretty good fit within the context of disputation and rejection that takes place in the Jerusalem Temple, during the

final days of Jesus' life. And yes: here as last week, it's not hard to see why the early church would see something of itself in this parable: a parable in which the Jewish people who largely rejected the Gospel are like those wedding guests who ignore the invitation (and, in effect, shoot the messengers!), only to be replaced by those outsiders, the Gentiles, who were not the ones initially intended for this particular feast, but who were called in—as it were—as last minute replacements. And yes, even that one hapless Gentile who gets bounced from the feast, serves as a useful reminder that even those last minute guests are expected to observe the house-rules, if they are to remain at the feast. All of that helps to explain this parable: to explain from whence it comes and why it is so fitting to the New Testament context in which we encounter it. But that still only begins to help us—at any rate—it still only begins to help me to grasp how we are to live with such a parable, how we might begin to grant it authority for us as we journey, indeed as we at times stumble, along the discipleship way. And here I must be honest:

Not only my training as a preacher...but my whole orientation as a person of faith...makes it impossible for me to engage a text such as this one, to engage a parable such as this one, without asking what is for me, the essential question, namely: "Where is the Gospel in this text? Where is the good news in this parable?" Because minus Gospel...minus good news...I have a hard time hearing this parable as anything other than a text of terror. A text of terror.

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Well...let's begin with the first segment of the parable: the segment in which the original guests choose to ignore the King's invitation, and rough up the servants who deliver the invitation. There's very little good news to be found in their rejection of the invitation...although it's a pretty accurate depiction of the way in which most of us are so busy with life's trivial pursuits, that we fail to seize hold of the one thing truly essential. Nor is there any good news to be found in the response of the King who slaughters those ingrates and destroys their city: much as the Romans, a few decades after the death of Christ, slaughtered the residents of Jerusalem and burned their city down. Was that God...or was that the Romans? Either way, not much Gospel in that, now is there! But no...no...the real good news...the real Gospel in this parable is the invitation extended to those who, up until this moment, had been on the outside looking in: who are now invited to become full members of the community of those celebrating the wedding feast of the King's son. To be truthful with you: I regard myself precisely in that way, someone who in his late twenties/early thirties, found that his cloud of cynicism was unexpectedly pierced by good news, news of a God whose arms were open wide, and whose passionate embrace was extended to the least likely of people. I came to regard myself as one such person...and to this day I remain profoundly grateful. That's Gospel...that's good news. And had the parable ended with that...I would be quite happy to wrap this up and call it a morning. However!

The parable doesn't end there. Having graciously received these outsiders—these strangers to the Kingdom into the Festival Hall—the King, having noticed that one

of them is ill-clothed, summarily has him thrown into the outer darkness. Nor are we left to imagine that he is an exceptional case. On the contrary: even though only one of those unexpected guests is shown the door, the parable concludes with the stark warning that he is merely a representative figure who typifies the ultimate destiny of many: *For many are called, but few are chosen*. Yes, you may have been called...but don't presume that you will be one of the ones left standing in the end. Many called...but only a few chosen! And yeah: if you are anything like me, you may find it a bit trickier to hear the Gospel...to hear the good news...buried deep beneath the surface of that stark ending to what is surely one of Christ's most stark parables.

A stark parable...a parable that may not be entirely welcome in a United Church setting in which we tend to value niceness above all other things. (And yes, let's have the honesty to acknowledge that this is not a nice parable; whatever else we want to say of this parable, let's not make the mistake of calling it nice!) A stark parable, definitely. But also...also a parable that, in its oddly far-from-nice way, tries to hold together the two things that Matthew's Gospel (perhaps more than any of the other Gospels) tries to hold together, namely that the grace of God is free, but it isn't cheap. It's free: the way that invitation is freely extended, in the parable, to those unexpected guests, the ones who were not anticipating being invited to the feast. The grace of God is free! But it's not cheap...and not only in the sense that Christ paid dearly for the outpouring of that grace with the offering of his life, but also in the sense that you and I are called to respond to that grace: not with self-satisfaction, not with the assumption that I'm okay/you're okay/it's all okay...but with a willingness freely to respond in faith/hope and love to the gift of faith/hope and love freely offered to us in Jesus Christ. At times those themes seem to be in tension with one another...not only in this parable but throughout the Gospel. But both themes matter...and both themes are part of the Gospel, part of the Good News: namely that yes, God loves us madly...but yes, God calls us to respond to that mad and passionate love.

And I love...I love the way in which Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar deals with the kinds of issues and questions raised by this parable in one of his final books: a book with the provocative title, *Dare we Hope that all Men Might be Saved*. For what it's worth, von Balthasar answers his own question in the affirmative, stressing that the key word in this is the word "hope"; in other words, he doesn't dictate to God that all must be saved, but as a Christian he regards it as his right—and perhaps his duty—to hope and, of course, to pray that all might be saved. At any rate: in that book he addresses the fact that there are no shortage of parables such as this one...no shortage of teachings such as this one: and not only in the Old Testament, friends, but throughout the New, throughout the Gospels, teachings that come straight from the lips of our Lord. And what von Balthasar says is fascinating and, for me, helpful. What he says is this. When he reads the gracious texts of the New Testament...the gracious texts of the Old Testament and yes, there are gracious texts in the Old Testament...when he encounters grace in our scriptures, he makes it a point to see that grace as directed to others, perhaps especially those he, himself, would regard as the least likely candidates for inclusion in God's Kingdom. But then, when he reads a harsh text, a troubling parable such as this morning's, he assumes that the word being spoken

is directed to him: that he's the one who needs to smarten up, that he's the one who needs to avoid taking God's grace for granted, that he's the one who needs to avoid presuming on the grace of God, that he's the one who must examine his own heart, his own mind, his own life, and resolve to recommit himself to the disciples way.

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Permit me a final thought.

This morning's parable...this parable of the Wedding Guests...whatever else it does in my world, it serves as a pretty powerful reminder as to why I always want to be able to read these parables—all of the parables—in the context of Christ's life, death and resurrection. I confess that I am always puzzled by folks who want to lift the teachings of Christ out from that context: from the context of his life, death and resurrection. Why puzzled? Because frankly, Jesus understood as only a teacher, can at times be terrifying...nowhere more so than in the telling of parables such as this one, parables that place us squarely before the judgement seat of the Holy God. Read in isolation from his life, I'm not sure I have the intestinal fortitude to live under the authority of such stark and troubling teachings. Read in the context of that life, however,...a life lived in utter devotion to God...and in utter solidarity with God's people—solidarity with sinners like me— indeed a life offered on behalf of a sinner such as me...read in that context, heard in that context: even a text of terror...even a parable filled with weeping, gnashing of teeth and all manner of dread and foreboding...

...heard in that context, even so stark a parable as this one, speaks a powerful word of life. A powerful word of invitation: to follow the One who spoke the parables...to follow in devotion, the One whose very life became a parable: a parable of God's unquenchable love.

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!