“Thy Will Be Done, On Earth As It Is In Heaven”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 12, 2023

Third Sunday of Lent — Psalm 106:1-5, 47-48

Rev. Dr. John Wahl — Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction

We have been reading the parables of Jesus as we travel through Matthew’s gospel. The last couple of weeks, we have listened to, first, the story of a landowner who advises his workers to allow wheat and weeds – good and evil - to grow together until harvest time comes, when the angels will separate that which we cannot, ourselves, rightly judge. Then, last week, we heard as Jesus told of the kingdom being like another landowner who hires workers for his vineyard at all different times of the day, then chooses to pay them not fairly – according to the amount of work each had done – but generously to all what is a just daily wage.

Much has happened since then in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus was welcomed by the crowds waving palms as enters Jerusalem; he then goes to the temple and overturns the money changer’s tables; confronting the religious establishment and irritating many of the people at the center of power. Jesus is only days away from his crucifixion and the religious leaders – to whom, along with the crowds, he is speaking in today’s parable – are planning his arrest. Jesus’ message here is apocalyptic: the end in very near. Still, he is not yet done describing – for all who will listen – what this kingdom of heaven, this alternate way of living, is like.

Read Matthew 22:1-14

This is an ugly parable – let’s just admit it. The A-Listers, those initially invited by the king to the wedding banquet, not only don’t want to go, they kill the messengers. In vengeful response, the king burns down their city. From the ashes, he brings in all those others who, at first, did not rate consideration. Each of them dutifully put on their wedding robes; all except for one who – when he can’t come up with a good excuse for being under-dressed – is bound and thrown out of the party. *Many are called, but few are chosen*, we are told.

Because, at first glance, the parable seems not to make sense, it is traditionally interpreted as an allegory: it is not a story about this kingdom, but another. The king here is God; the party is not a worldly wedding feast but the heavenly banquet. The first group, who refuse the invitation, are the people of Israel; when God sends messengers – the prophets – to remind them of their obligations, they are ignored, rejected, even killed. As a result of their unfaithfulness, God punishes them; but then mercifully extends a second round of invitations – this time through a new messenger, Jesus – who welcomes in everyone, good and bad; even Gentiles, *even us*.

That is the traditional interpretation; and it's a convenient one, *for us.* Along with the way much of the New Testament has historically been viewed, the Jewish people get it wrong and lose their "chosen" place on God's A-List to the more deserving (gentile) church. This is a dangerous and wounding angle on the story – one that contributes to the long, bloody history of the church's abusive relationship with the very faith from which Jesus came.[1]

One of the ways to look at a parable is to try to locate ourselves in it. I'm sure you've received invitations that you weren't too excited to accept: maybe you didn't know the host well or weren't interested in others who would be there; or you were busy and occupied with other things; or you didn't want to have to dress up and play the etiquette game. There have likely also been times when you offered the invitation and – whatever their excuse – your guests didn't show up. Or maybe you've been that one singled out and excluded: if not for what you were wearing, then some other petty reason.

Most of us have found ourselves in these types of situations – uncomfortable, unfair, or inconvenient – but it doesn't lead to murder. Nothing in this story is balanced or proportionate. If this is meant to be a picture of how God deals with Creation, God seems unworthy of the name.[2]

As followers of Christ, do we really believe in a God as petty, vengeful, and thin-skinned as the king in this parable? A God who burns an entire city to the ground; who forces people to celebrate his son's marriage while armies wreak destruction right outside; who casts a guest into the "outer darkness" for an absurd reason beyond their control?

Many interpreters have suggested that the wedding robe is not really about having the right clothes, but instead our response to the gracious invitation offered to

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[1] Debie Thomas, "The God Who Isn't"
[2] Richard Swanson from *A Provocation*

us; the faithfulness to and focus on justice that God expects of us. As Thomas Long asks about the one guest who was discovered not properly attired:

Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? Where is his regard for generosity? The other guests humbly, quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive wedding garments of worship and celebration, but there he is, bellying up to the punch bowl, stuffing his mouth…and wiping his hands on his T-shirt.[3]

Maybe the text today isn't interested in our questions that attempt to understand – and avoid – this poor guest's fate. Rather, it simply states a truth: that a seat at the banquet table in the kingdom of heaven will require something more than merely accepting an invitation. It is not enough to RSVP "yes." *Many are called and few are chosen*, indeed. The chosen are the ones who realize that just showing up is not enough; who understand that the time for bringing about the kingdom of heaven is now – not later, not someday, but now. Karoline Lewis asks:

What not to wear? Complacency, conformity, and any kind of garb that is content with the way things are. What should we wear, so that the whole of the world can see who we are and what we are about? The kind of compassion birthed by God's own righteousness that cannot, anymore, leave things the way things are.[4]

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son," Jesus says by way of introduction to this parable. What happens if we try to take Jesus at his word? What might we learn if we attempt an honest comparison between God's realm and our current one? Are *our* tables open to all who come, and does *our* love extend to those who initially refuse the invitation? Are we willing to provide welcome to those who show up unkempt and unprepared? Do we take offense when people shy away from our banquet, or do we listen as they explain why our invitation strikes them as unappealing or inauthentic? Do we really want to open our arms wide, or do we have some secret wish to see certain people instead end up in the "outer darkness"?

There is a tendency, with these parables of Jesus, to leap to the allegorical interpretation; to assume that any character who holds power – landowner, ruler, king – no matter how violent or vindictive their behavior, must be God. We tend to define God by association with anyone with power – especially when it is coercive, vengeful, or exploitative; whether they go by the name of Caesar or Hitler or Putin. We are quick to forget that Jesus – as God's beloved son – reveals for us the true traits of

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[3] Thomas Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*

[4] Karoline Lewis, "What Not to Wear" from *WorkingPreacher.com*

divine strength: compassion, gentleness, and mercy; healing the sick, lifting up the weak, and welcoming the outcast.

What if the God in this parable is that one guest who decides not the "wear the robe" of coerced celebration; the one guest whose resistance brings the sham of the feast to a halt? This one brave guest decides that he'd rather be bound "hand and foot" and cast out than accept the authority of a violent, loveless ruler. What if Jesus was the one discovered without the robe? Why, because it had been given to you and to me.

What would change in our understanding of this parable if Jesus was the unrobed guest and not the furious king? How would we have to change to welcome, to honor, and to stand alongside such a guest? What robes of privilege and complicity would we have to refuse to wear? What feasts would we need to forgo to follow this unrobed dissenter when he is escorted into the darkness, bound and broken for the sake of love?

Jesus calls us not just to locate ourselves in the place of the characters in his stories, but also to put ourselves in the shoes of our entire fellow humanity: people from different religions and continents, living with every privilege or burden, with every economic or health condition. As we have been learning in our walk through Matthew, forgiveness is to be granted to others in the same measure by which we are forgiven by God; and everyone in the vineyard is meant to receive their daily bread.

The parables of Jesus – these stories about what the kingdom of heaven is like – afflict the comfortable as much as they comfort the afflicted. They are meant to show us – just like the original hearers – who God is, as well as who God is not. May we embrace the loving God rather than a vindictive one. May we choose discomfort over apathy, even if when costs us a spot in the palace. And may we reject the invitations of heartless kings to sham banquets while stomachs are empty and cities burn.

The hard news here is that, although everyone is invited, everyone is also required to put on the clothing of justice, compassion, and healing. *Thy will be* done, we pray, *on earth as it is in heaven*. Not the will of a vengeful tyrant, but of the God we see in Jesus our savior and friend. So, the good news here is that, through the gracious invitation of Jesus, each are welcome and – whether good or bad, first or last – all are included in God's vision for the true and eternal heavenly banquet. Thanks be to God. Amen.