**October 12, 2014 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s Gospel gives us the last of Jesus’ three “in your face, Pharisees and Scribes” parables. He must have really been getting under the Jewish leaders’ skin because the very next verse, after this passage, goes, “Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.” ‘Nuff said!

Of the three, this last parable is by far the wildest. I have to constantly remind myself that these are meant to be allegorical, not realistic, because I keep trying to make sense of them. And this one is just crazy!

It starts out pretty normally. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” I can see the kingdom of heaven being compared to a banquet – good company, lots to eat and drink, maybe music, or in other words, to quote Kool & the Gang, “It’s a celebration!” For those of you who are old enough to know that song, you’re welcome for the ear worm!

But then it goes off the rails. The king sends out invitations to all the big wigs in town to come to his shindig. That makes sense. But the day of the wedding arrives and no one shows. So the king sends his servants to remind everyone, since they are probably really busy and important, and just forgot. The biggest event of the year. A command appearance. By the king. Right.

Well he gives them the benefit of the doubt anyway and sends the servants, with yummy details about all the great food and drink they’re going to have when they get there. But incredibly, rather than running to the palace in flocks for the free food and schmoozing with the king, some of these people blow the servants off with lame excuses, some make sure the servants can’t get past their receptionists, and some, incredibly, order the servants to be beaten up and even killed. All right, this has stopped making sense.

So the king, displaying the anger management issues of a Bridezilla, sends troops into the city and kills the bigwigs and burns the city to the ground. Maybe just a little overkill? Then, realizing that he still has a banquet room to fill, he sends still more servants into what must be the smoking ruin of the town to round up everyone who’s left – both the good and the bad, the text says – and bring them to the feast. Whew! Crisis averted!

But wait! The king, wandering through the hall and glad-handing his new guests, notices that one of them isn’t wearing a wedding robe. So he pounces on this poor guy and demands to know why he’s not properly dressed. Well, the guy is speechless, either because he’s being pounced on by the king, or because his mouth is full, or for some other reason, but before he can say anything, the king orders the servants to tie him up and throw him out. Pretty harsh considering he was doing the king a favor by coming in the first place!

At this point, I have to remind myself again that this is a parable and not a news report. Although some news reports seem to be less factual than some parables. But anyway, this is not meant to be taken literally. It’s meant to be taken SERIOUSLY, but not literally. So let’s pull out some of the important elements to examine, such as the original invitees, the servants, the destruction of the town, the missing wedding robe, the new invitees, and the party itself.

A lot of scholarship has gone into interpreting these parables, and sometimes the results are inconclusive. Almost like the scholars are guessing, which, of course, couldn’t be the case! Well, many do seem to agree that the original people invited to the party are the Jewish people, God’s original chosen people, and since Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and Scribes here, that makes sense.

The jury is still out as to whether the servants who bring the invitations to the people and are subsequently killed, represent the prophets of old or Jesus himself. Maybe both. It IS allegory after all. The point is that God has invited the Jews to the banquet, and they, or more specifically the Pharisees, have rejected or are rejecting that invitation.

As far as the destruction of the town goes, if you’re in the school of thought that has Matthew being written before 70AD, the burning of the city could represent the first destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 597BC, which sent the Jews into exile. This event looms large in Judaism even to this day, and much of the Old Testament was written in response to the Babylonian Captivity, as it was called.

Or, if you go with the majority of scholars, who feel that Matthew was written after 70AD, then the city burning is obviously a reference to the very recent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that year. So the Jews reject the prophets, or they reject the Messiah, and Jerusalem falls as a result. Personally, I struggle with the idea that God ordered the destruction of Jerusalem either of those times, but the writers of both the Old and New Testaments had to try to make sense of these cataclysmic events as best as they could.

Now we get to the part of the story that most involves us, the outsiders who were invited to the party after the original people turned it down. What does it mean to be invited to this party? How should we act? And what’s with the wedding robe?

Jewish weddings in first century Palestine were lavish affairs. They didn’t last part of a day, or even all day. They went on for a week. And there were certain rules to be followed for both the hosts and the guests, like proper attire. Everyone was expected to dress to the nines, in very specific wedding clothes. It would be similar to getting an invitation to a party that said “Black Tie,” or even more formally, “White Tie.” If you were invited to an event like that, you’d rent a tux or buy a gown, not show up in blue jeans or zubaz.

But these poor people were just ordinary folks. They would no sooner expect to be invited to the prince’s wedding than they would fly to the moon. They almost certainly didn’t have the proper duds for such a fancy feast. And, since the king’s soldiers had just leveled the town, their shopping options were limited.

Again, the scholars and theologians had a field day with this. St. Augustine suggested that, in the case of a royal wedding, the wedding clothes would have been provided to the guests by the king himself, since most people wouldn’t have occasion to have a set of their own. There isn’t a lot of evidence either for or against this theory, and since Augustine was a lot closer timewise to Jesus than we are, I think we can bow to his authority on this subject.

This makes it easier to think that the guy wasn’t being punished for his poverty, but rather for his unwillingness to respect the king’s wishes. So he’s invited to this big shindig and given the proper clothes to wear to it, but simply doesn’t put them on. Maybe he’s saving them “for later.” Maybe he plans to sell them as soon as the party’s over. Maybe he’s just stubborn and doesn’t think the king is the boss of him. Who knows. Whatever his reasoning, it gets him cast out.

Once again, this is allegory. We could think of the outer darkness simply as hell, and that guy is being sent there for his disobedience. The text says that the servants gathered in everyone they could find, both bad and good, so maybe this is one of the bad ones who’s just getting what he deserves. But the word for darkness here, *skotos*, means physical darkness, but it also means ignorance, especially of God, and obscurity. Metaphorical darkness.

Which leaves the rest of the party guests – the rest of US – and the banquet itself. It’s clear, or as clear as anything is in this parable, that God is extending his invitation past his original chosen people to all the earth. He is drawing all of us into the party of the ages, and he’s leaving it up to us how we respond. This concept wasn’t new to Matthew’s audience, as our reading from Isaiah today makes clear:

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for* ***all*** *peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over* ***all*** *peoples, the sheet that is spread over* ***all*** *nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from* ***all*** *faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from* ***all*** *the earth, for the LORD has spoken.*

This is the banquet that we are all invited to, regardless of who we are and what we have done. All the past is wiped clean. However, it’s not just about showing up. It’s about how we allow ourselves to be transformed by the banquet. It’s about manifesting the fruits of the Spirit in our lives.

It isn’t enough just to come to church on Sunday. How are we with God the rest of the week? Do the fruits of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, as Paul writes to the Galatians, inform everything we do?

Do we wear the robe of truth and light every day, or let ourselves be shrouded in our old darkness, which is almost always the easier path. Things like gossip, meanness, stinginess, or contempt are all part of that darkness and pull us away from the light until pretty soon we’re sitting on the stoop next to that ex-wedding guest.

We have choices to make and actions to take every day. The world isn’t kind to Jesus’ followers now, any more than it was back then, so we might have some tough decisions in front of us. But, we also should enjoy the party! One of the best commentaries I read on this passage said:

*Within the world of the story as told, the problem with this guy is not that he is not taking things seriously enough. No, his problem is a failure to party. The kingdom of heaven (verse 2) is a banquet, after all, and you’ve got to put on your party dress and get with the program. The kingdom music is playing, and it's time to get up on the dance floor. Or, as the slightly more sober, but no less theologically astute [Karl] Barth put the matter: “In the last resort, it all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore* festively*, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all**.”*

Jesus ends this parable with the enigmatic phrase, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” This speaks to the fact that we have the power to choose here. It’s not talking about being exclusionary. One author, Ken Collins, puts it best when he says:

*[It] doesn’t mean that God calls a lot of people, picks over them, and keeps only a few. If that were true, the middle of the parable would have no meaning. It means that God calls everyone and gives them the power to respond—but to be chosen, we must respond to the call, using the power God gave us for that purpose.*

We have been invited to a great feast, and now it’s up to us to choose to respond to that call or not and what we’re going to do when we get there. So I say, let’s get out there, put on our party clothes, and choose together to join in the celebration of God’s eternal and never changing love for us!

Amen