

[Lent 3 Wedding Banquet]

3 LENT
MARCH 23/24

1st MARSHALL
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PS 72:1-7; MT 22:1-14
Wedding Banquet

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe, and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

We need to talk about Jesus' parables. Like any good author, legend spinner, or campfire ghost-story teller, in the parables told by Jesus, he paints word pictures that are bigger than life. People who are good or bad, nasty or nice, selfish or giving, hurtful or forgiving – all such personas are blown out of proportion. That's one of the marks of a great storyteller...

Another is that almost always, good triumphs over evil in the end. From the Brother's Grimm and their dark fairy tales, to George Lucas and his Star Wars empire, good tale-tellers help us see that, while there are mean people and bad monsters and terrible pain in life, the forces of good, honor and truth will prevail in the end.

And like all great stories, Jesus' parables often have a hook that catches us – possibly in one or more of our many attitudes of sin, but just as often they catch us in a good way, when the lightbulb comes on, when our heart feels filled, when we *get it* about our spirits in synch with God's Spirit...and when that happens, we're blown away by the sheer delight of God's grace.

Last week I mentioned the parable of the Prodigal Son so let's revisit that story to show what I'm talking about. [quick retell]

-The rudeness of the younger son is...over-the-top *unspeakable* – he basically tells his dad: *Drop dead and show me the money!!*

-The intolerance of the morally superior older brother is...over-the-top *unspeakable* – we're pretty convinced that he's never even smiled in his life, let alone attend any kind of party!!

-And, finally, some of us feel a little uncomfortable with the over-the-top *unspeakable* eagerness of the father to forgive his wayward son. We want to ask the man, *Are you sure the kid's really sorry for his sins? Are you convinced that he's mended his wanton and willful ways? Do you really believe that **now** he will grow up to be **responsible**?*

How many of you identify with the father??? – raise your hand.

How many of you identify with, or feel empathy for, the younger son?

And how many of you are like me? When you look in the mirror, you see the upset older brother???

One more parable in which the personas are blown out of proportion is the story of the Good Samaritan. [quick retell]

In fact, most Priests and Levites were **very** good people. By contrast, **everyone hated** any and all *Samaritans*. So in the story, the accusation that those religious men were insensitive to a person in need would have been **astonishing**. In the same way, it would have come as an absolute surprise to hear that the stranger who was so compassionate and generous was...a Samaritan!!!

So this over-the-top imagery and the emotional reactions it evokes is standard fare for parables. As such, it's certainly present, maybe even especially present, in today's story: the Wedding Banquet for the king's son.

Now, before we get to the details, I want to set the context for you.

In Matthew's Gospel, this teaching takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. He's going to die, it's gonna be ugly, and...he...knows it...

The previous chapter tells the story of Palm Sunday when Jesus rides into town...on a donkey...

Now that may seem kind of benign, humble and maybe even cute or quaint to us... Yet to the people of **Jerusalem**, they would have seen that as Jesus making the outright claim...that he was their...*king*.

That's what Jewish monarchs did:

- they rode into town for their coronation ceremony
- not on a war horse, but on a donkey,
- "humbling" themselves before almighty God,
- that the Lord might smile on the king's years of ruling the nation.

Here's proof of what I'm saying. When the parade is over, we're told in MT 21:10...the whole city was in turmoil...!!!

As if that's not enough fuel to add to the fire, in quick succession Jesus continues his assault on the business-as-usual attitude of the religious authorities:

He:

- cleanses the temple, upsetting the *money men and merchants* – (always a powerful lobby!!),
- embarrasses the *chief priests and the elders* – (another powerful group!!),
- and then tells three parables in a row – each of which pokes a stick in the eye of the **Jewish leaders** who say that Jesus is a false messiah.

Jesus knows...that his enemies want him dead.

Jesus knows...that his followers will fall away.

Jesus knows...that his death is very close...and

Jesus knows...that God intends it to happen this way...

As a former bishop of mine liked to say about this snarky, prickly side of our Lord: *we have entered the time of the “cranky Jesus”* – the closer he gets to the cross, the more serious he is about his actions and teachings... His earlier stories of generosity and forgiveness are replaced by stories that deal with rejection and pain.

And yet, and yet, even in these parables from late in Jesus’ ministry, there are nuggets of grace to be found and treasured...which brings us to our parable for today.

Even in this wacky story about a *Wedding Banquet gone WAY-bad*, Jesus manages to give us a beautiful glimpse into the promise of God’s deep-seated, all-encompassing, never-ending love, and absolutely amazing grace.



A wedding banquet for a prince would be the social event of a decade...maybe even a lifetime! Just look at the world-wide attention devoted to last year's wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan. **Do you think anyone who received an invitation to that feast would treat it with such disdain?** Hardly!!

And yet, in our parable, EVERYONE who was invited, everyone rejects the king's invitation – **TWICE!** Some invitees even abuse the invitation deliverers – and kill of them!! (like I said, *over the top!!!*)

Well, the king responds in kind – an eye for an eye (...on *steroids!!!*). Surprise, surprise, it turns into a bloody mess...and then...when enough blood has been spilled...just like that (!) the king's back...in...party mode!!! He sends out his slaves into the crowds and says, ***Invite everyone you find to the banquet!***



Well...the slaves take their master at his word and start rounding up people right and left – both, we're told, **the good and the bad**...hm....

What in the world does ***that*** mean??? If their king had just annihilated a boat-load of BAD PEOPLE...what's gonna happen when MORE bad people show up to this prickly premier's party???

You remember what happens... After all the bloodshed, the wedding reception gets cranked up with everyone – good and bad – having a grand old time with the king and his family. But suddenly, when the king stands up to walk through the crowd and accept their thanks for his generosity, he comes across one man, in fact, the only person in the great banquet hall, who is improperly dressed for the occasion.

Now, I have to tell you that I spent a long time looking for an image of a poorly dressed person in the middle of a group of beautiful people. I couldn't find anything I liked.

Eventually, I gave up and asked Shelly Maes, our worship-picture-guru, to do what I could not. Apparently, it wasn't just me, for she spent a lot of time looking as well. Finally, she sent to me the image you're gonna see in just a moment. It was one that I had also noticed, but had by-passed because it wasn't exactly what I was looking for.

So imagine a modern wedding reception, in which every guest, if they couldn't afford their own, was offered a nice coat or dress that would help them feel like they belonged there.

Then imagine that one character shows up who says, *No thanks*, to the offer of nice clothing – and insists on crashing the party wearing only what he has on...

Are you ready for it? Here it is...a modern rendition of the guest without a proper wedding gown...



Kinda leaves you speechless, doesn't it???

Well, surprise, surprise, eventually the king notices the gentleman dressed **UNLIKE** the rest of the crowd...and says, *Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?*

We can only imagine the king's tone of voice, but the use of the word *friend* might cause us to pause and imagine some possibilities...

Perhaps, the word *friend* means just that. Maybe the king thought that his servants had dis-honored the man by failing to give him a robe. Either they missed him or dissed him, and the king was gonna put things right.

But the man doesn't answer the king – he says nothing to the Master of the feast, the provider of the party, the father of the groom, the King of the land...he said nothing...

Now, I rarely find myself speechless...and occasionally wish that I had been silent because I spoke before I thought...(I'm sure that never happens to you...) But on those rare occasions when I am unable to speak, I think it's often because I have no excuse for my *behavior*: my words, my looks, my actions...guilt often keeps us...silent.

There are hundreds of possible responses, but the guest in this parable says... nothing. "He is speechless." He stands before his host, and offers nothing in response to the question. The king's silence is more than mere annoyance – he's *angry*. So here's a question for you: *What provokes this depth of anger?*



Angela Liston, a friend of ours in Anchorage, once said this about our passage:

She wrote, I have teenagers, children whom I love more than life itself. But I've also experienced a depth of anger that caught me off guard. Imagine that your son is two hours late for dinner. He comes home in a sullen mood that only a teenager can understand. You ask, maybe in a somewhat accusatory tone, "Where have you been? Why didn't you call and tell me you'd be late for dinner?"

Now, your son can respond,

"I got tied up at football practice and lost track of time." or

"I missed the bus and had to walk home." or

"A friend was having a hard day so I spent some time with him."

There are hundreds of possible responses...but you don't get any.

*Your child stands in front of you, silent and sullen,
then turns and walks away.*

Suddenly, with an anger whose only source can be a deep, abiding love, you scream. "I asked you a question! You're grounded! Go to your room!"

*Weeping and gnashing of teeth follow. Our **friends** (teenagers, spouses, neighbors, co-workers) sometimes reject us – they refuse to be in relationship with us. They shut us out, and suddenly a love that knows no bounds becomes a ferocious anger...(in our efforts to break through to the one who has become closed to us).*

That's pretty good, isn't it???

Like I said, we can't know what triggered the king's response, but I choose to not let that sad snippet of an ending ruin the grace that's there to be embraced.



This is a hard passage to understand as a whole – and individual pieces of it make us shake our heads.

Those who are not blessed in the story include:

- the people who didn't want to come in the first place,
- the people who delighted in treating the king's slaves cruelly, and
- the guy who had no excuse for rejecting the king's offer of a robe.

But in all that **bad** news...don't forget the **good news** of the king's instructions to his servants at the end:

Go, therefore, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet...

And what's cool about that is how the King's servants took it upon themselves to interpret that word "everyone" literally! Says Jesus, *they gathered up all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests!!*

Those who are blessed in this parable are ALL the people who are happy just to come to the party.

The king is bound and determined to be known as the epitome of generosity, a well-spring of hospitality, a fountain of charity. None are told to stay away, all are welcomed in, even, and most amazingly, the **bad** along with the **good!**

But...there is this uncomfortable side to God's single-minded devotion to fill the festival with friends, foes and even fools. Our assertion that we are free to be "neutral" about God in our lives is here revealed to be a lot of rot. We can reject God's call, or we can relax in God's grace, but to be "speechless", to say nothing, to be neutral is not allowed.

When that happens, God goes ballistic, blows a gasket, pours out a barrel of bile on whichever hapless Harry or Helen happens to harden their hearts against him. Like a parent who's worried about a wayward child, God pulls no punches when the fate of any offspring is up for grabs. Here God reveals a fierce determination, just like a parent's persistent prerogative. The stakes are too high, family too important, the individual too beloved to allow their rejection of love to be tolerated or ignored.

God's eagerness to invite is fantastic...God's willingness to listen is almost as amazing...*to our prayers, to our problems, to our petulance, to our pain...*

But God's refusal to let us go without a fight is nothing short of a miracle... from the ends of the earth, to the depths of hell, Christ has gone, is going and will continue to go inviting us all in to come in to the feast – his wedding banquet of love.

Amen.