

Isaiah 25: 1-9
Philippians 4: 1-13
Matthew 22: 1-14

A Feast for All Peoples
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Don't you just love parables? We have had a sequence of them in the last few weeks, and they always tie my mind in knots. As they should tie your minds in knots, and leave you a little uncomfortable. As Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan says, "If an audience kept complete silence during a challenge parable from Jesus and if an audience filed past him afterward saying, 'Lovely parable, this morning, Rabbi,' Jesus would have failed utterly." Parables are not tame, they are dangerous: expect to be shocked. The authorities did not execute Jesus for telling feel-good stories. Another scholar, poet and activist from the Roman Catholic tradition, Daniel Berrigan, said, "The parables of Christ, even the innocent, pastoral, tender, innocuous-seeming ones, conceal just below the surface a whiplash, a shock, a charge of dynamite. The stories set conventional expectations, whether concerning God, religion, politics, vocation, status and class, utterly off kilter." Since those statements resonate with my feelings as I study the parables, I eagerly turned to Berrigan's writings to give me some insights, and I am indebted to him for his thoughts on the Parable of the Wedding Banquet.

The feast, or the banquet, is a familiar setting for stories and poetry in the Bible. And no wonder: in a culture where most peoples' day to day lives were full of hardship and monotony, the opportunity to feast was a landmark event. Many people could rarely afford to eat meat, so when someone actually slaughtered an animal and shared it around, it was memorable. A feast meant that there was enough, there was plenty, and they had kept the wolf from the door, so to speak.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a human king who gave a wedding banquet for his son..." A *royal* wedding banquet! Even better: a sort of superlative metaphor for the best feast ever, on an occasion of national celebration. And over the years, preachers have taken the bait, so to speak, and decided that "may be compared to" means "is." So, in their eyes, the king in the story must be God, and then the other characters fall in to place as whomever God does not like. For instance, a common interpretation is that the wedding feast was an image of the everlasting happiness that the God prepared for the members of the Church. Those invited first were the Jews who imprisoned, mistreated and killed the prophets and apostles. As a punishment for their outrageous rebellion, the city of Jerusalem in was destroyed by the Romans in about year 70 of the common era. The one without the correct wedding garment would be a Christian who was not Christ-like enough. Martin Luther, who inaugurated the Reformation 500 years ago, gave another interpretation. He said that those who mistreated the messenger slaves were the Pope and his followers: "Such judgment we must now also pass on our persecutors and blasphemers of the Gospel, as for example the Pope and his following, and entirely separate ourselves from them, as they do not in the least belong to the church of Christ, but are damned by their own judgment; to which they testify by having turned us away as outlaws and outcasts." And the one without the correct wedding garment is often interpreted as someone who is living an impure life, who does not merit an invitation to any feast, but merits being "bound hand and foot, and thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is a very convenient parable, then, for calling down the judgment of the king (aka God) on our enemies everywhere.

By the way, don't you love that phrase: "weeping and gnashing of teeth?" I heard a possibly apocryphal story about Ian Paisley, the virulent, anti-Catholic, Northern Irish biblical literalist. He would preach hell-fire & damnation about this parable on many occasions. A little old lady near the pulpit interrupted and said to him, "That's all very well, Reverend, but what about those of us who don't have any teeth left to gnash?!" Without pausing in his stride Paisley came back with, "Mother, have no fear! Teeth will be provided!"

Here's my problem: none of this sounds like the God Jesus speaks about elsewhere, or indeed anything like Jesus himself. Christians believe, in general, that looking at Jesus tells us about God, and that looking at Jesus shows us pure grace. The Gospel writer Matthew gives us the Beatitudes, with "blessed are the peacemakers." Nowhere do I find grace or peace in this parable. It is pretty clear to me that we are being asked to *contrast* this human king's behavior with that of the king of heaven. I also think that this story would have triggered some response in Jesus' listeners. It might have addressed a specific historical situation and a common social history of experience. The first hearers of this parable would hear "human king" and think of Herod or the Roman Emperor. There was no lack of petty kings in his time, those whose honor depended on universal admiration and subservience, those for whom a slight or an imagined threat would inspire a massacre. One thinks of King Herod, who did even crazier things. One thinks of anyone with an army big enough and an ego big enough to pressure people into attending a wedding feast, or to beat them up when they did not look right once they got there. Those people exist, a counterpoint and contrast to grace, and they take a toll of enormous human suffering. When they got to the burned city part, Jesus' listeners would really begin to think of such tragedies in their own time.

This is one instance where I really want to take issue with those who say: "I don't like the Old Testament. It is so full of violence. The New Testament is all about love." In our readings today, it is the Old Testament God who "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." It is the God of the Hebrews who will gently wipe tears from the faces of those who mourn, and remove disgrace from those who have been shamed. I'd rather be invited to that feast any day.

Back to the parable: what is the deal with this supposed party? Who are these people who would rather go about their daily business rather than come to the royal wedding? Maybe the boycott of the banquet was an act of resistance, resisting the summons of worldly power. Maybe those who were sent around to summon the guests were the minions and thugs of the Empire, and their "invitation" was more like a veiled threat. Maybe the reluctant guests could be the people of Roman-occupied Judea, who were not thrilled to collaborate or celebrate with these overlords. They might even use violence to resist them. We have to admit that this is a bit disappointing for those of us who want to admire the resisters. Do they have to sink to using their overlord's tactics? No one looks good in this sad story. Eventually, all people left standing, the good and the bad, are compelled to cooperate. They are rounded up to attend the banquet. The domination is complete. Except for that one man, rounded up with the rest of them, the one with the wrong robe. He stands silently in front of his accusers – not violent, but suffering on behalf of all those who unable to stand up to tyrants themselves. Remind you of anyone? He's the one who reminds me of Jesus.

What is the deal with this wedding garment problem? It seems that the king has been slighted. Someone is not wearing the right clothes. You have to wonder: "the city has just burned down, my house is gone, my neighbors are dead, my nose is full of smoke, I'm terrified at the feast

– where was I supposed to get a robe?” But the caprice and the power of this king, with his false friendliness: “Friend, how did you get in here ...” - his duplicity knows no bounds. This was a set-up.

What is the deal with “Many are called but few are chosen?” Who is really speaking those words? Here’s a thought: maybe these are not the words of Jesus or of God. What if the words that sum up the parable belong to the king who judged so harshly, the one who infused his position as host with his dark moods of condemnation and retaliation. What if the king says to himself in selfish satisfaction, invulnerable and vengeful: “Many are called, but few are chosen.” These are not the words of Jesus; they are the words of the worldly host and warrior, the one given to eviction and slaughter. He chooses just the one poorly dressed guest. One needs to be cast out. That is the way that the powerful can restore some sort of psychic equilibrium.

So, what is the deal? What can this bizarre story teach us? Matthew works hard elsewhere, and works hard here, to tell us that the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing like this violent king who gives a sham banquet. It turns out that it is a feast for all peoples. It is a gathering where the host first makes sure everyone is safe. The host first dries the eyes of any grieving people. The host is able to keep the powers of death at bay, long enough for everyone to feel safe, and fed and loved.

Recently I heard a story about Vernon Jordan and Donald Hollowell, African American lawyers working in Georgia in the 1950’s. They were the defense team for a black man wrongly accused of murder and rape, and, during the lunch break from the courtroom, they would eat baloney sandwiches in their car, as they were not welcome in any coffee shop in town. One day, an older African American woman came up to them and said, “Don’t eat those sandwiches there tomorrow – come to my house when the court closes at 3:30, and I’ll give you lunch.” When the lawyers arrived, they found the table set for royalty: the best linen, china and crystal, and delicious smells coming from the kitchen. All the neighbors had come over in their best clothes. It was “a moment of grace and quiet rebellion,” as Jordan later called it. They joined hands to say grace, and as the husband of their hostess prayed, he said, “Lord, way down here in Tattnall County, we cannot join the NAACP, but thanks to your bountiful blessings, we can feed the NAACP lawyers.” They did not need weapons to establish the kingdom of heaven, they just needed the solidarity and courage of the feast for all peoples.

No violence. No burning cities. In fact, these acts of solidarity and resistance may sometimes be done in silence, just as that man stood in silent resistance to the brutal king. The early Christians, the people of Mathew’s Gospel and Paul’s communities, knew that they could not resist that violence of their rulers and their surroundings with more violence. They needed a different tool, a stronger weapon. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Philippians. This is no parable: Paul speaks plainly to particular people in a particular place. He encourages them to “stand firm in the Lord,” to overcome small disagreements, to work together for the greater good. He tells them that faith will be nurtured and shaped by living in affirmation of the blessings of God. “Rejoice in the Lord,” he insists. Joy, gentleness, praise, gratitude will lead us to the peace of God, which passes the comprehension or understanding of those who jockey for power by more violent or domineering means.

This may or may not come naturally to us. Paul reminds us that we have to consciously call certain things to mind, in resistance to our culture’s use of fear and scarcity and polarization and

negative thinking. Yes, danger and limitation and scarcity are out there, but we do not have to be spiritually stunted by them. We can choose a different way.

We can think about whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable: excellent things, things worthy of praise. In doing so – let's admit it – we stand in resistance to a culture of negativity. We stand in resistance to a culture of “not enough.” We stand in resistance to any culture that excludes and demeans people on the basis of physical appearance or wealth or race or gender or orientation. We celebrate resistance to any power that corrupts or exploits. We proudly show up at the feast in the wrong garment.

It starts with gratitude and gentleness. “The Lord is near,” says Paul. We stop a moment, and breathe. The Lord is near. Therefore, rejoice. Therefore, be grateful. Therefore, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” Therefore, that brutal king cannot compel me to dress the way he wants, or enjoy his false feast. Therefore, we stand with that silent man, who allowed himself to be bound, hand and foot, rather than use violence. Therefore, we belong to a great company that stands together: grateful, gentle, strong, peaceful, hopeful. We all have something in common. Because of the words and life of that man, we may rejoice to be guests at the feast for all peoples. Amen.