

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014
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The middle part of Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet is one of my favorites of all the stories Jesus tells. It really draws you in, doesn't it? Who doesn't like a party, after all. And this party is the one that all the really cool people got invited to. It's like the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Except that when the Beckhams and Elton John and the Prime Minister and the Grand Duke and Duchess of Luxembourg didn't show up, they invited you. Which was just great until you realized you didn't have a fascinator, one of those fancy cocktail hats. And then...well, is that really any way to treat a guest?

To really wrestle with this story, the good parts and the disturbing parts, we need to ask three questions. Why did Jesus tell it, why did Matthew tell it, and why do we retell it? In other words, what did it say to the people who first heard it, what did it say to the early Christians trying to live by Jesus' word and example, and what does it say to us?

Well, Jesus is talking to the religious leaders of his own community. This parable is part of a series that we have been reading over the last few weeks whereby Jesus confronts those in authority, challenging them with their failure to recognize the call of God to serve and welcome all, and suggesting that they have, by their failures, lost the authority to lead.

But Jesus has a larger target in mind as well. Whenever Jesus talks about “The Kingdom of Heaven,” it’s important to remember that he’s not talking about what we can expect when we die, he’s talking about the beloved community we are supposed to be building here and now. The opposite of the Kingdom of Heaven isn’t the Kingdom of Hell, it’s the Empire; the brutal, oppressive government that has subjugated much of the world, mistreated its citizens and its slaves, and whose power Jesus is doing his best to undermine every day. What the leaders of his own community don’t understand, as we’ll see next Sunday, when they try to trick him into speaking directly against the emperor, is that Jesus sees them, the leaders of his church, as being in cahoots with the very empire that oppresses them, participating in the abuse of the people he is striving to liberate. No wonder when they show up at God’s party still dressed in the garments of the oppressor, they’re really not welcome.

But when Matthew repeats Jesus’ story, his community is in a different circumstance. Matthew belongs to the community that survived the war between the Jews of Jerusalem and the Roman Empire that culminated with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE. Most of the survivors have fled Jerusalem and settled in Galilee, and as there is not much use for the priests without a temple, the Pharisees, who had been a minor group in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, have risen to positions of authority in the post-war Jewish community. And there is a great deal

of tension between the members of this community who look to Jesus as their teacher, and those who look to the Pharisees.

And there can be no doubt that for Matthew, this parable speaks to that tension. In the midst of the war and devastation, God is still inviting us to celebrate, but there are obligations that come with the invitation. You have to do your part. The great debate in Matthew's community, not really settled during Matthew's lifetime, was whether you had to be Jewish to be a follower of Jesus. Whether and how to welcome gentiles into their fold was the great question. So many in Matthew's own community would have seen the guest who showed up at the wedding banquet without the proper clothing as symbolizing someone who had not been circumcised, but most would have understood that he was someone who had not been baptized.

And baptism, in Matthew's day, did not mean simply going through a ritual bath and rising from the waters reborn in Christ. Baptism was the sign not just that you were marked as Christ's own forever, but that you had been through some intensive training – three years of study not of scriptures and theology, because the Gospels and the Epistles were just starting to be written and collected, but in Christian living. Three years of learning how take care of the needy and share your possessions with the community and stand up to the Empire without getting killed, and how to die as a witness to your faith in Jesus and God if you were caught.

We, of course, don't do that anymore. Most of the people we baptize haven't even been around for three years, and pretty much all of their training in Christian living and in scripture, creeds and prayer book will come later, long after they are baptized into the community of the faithful.

So what, then can this parable mean for us, whose lives are so different from Jesus' and Matthew's community? I think we need to set aside the first part of the story, the part about slaughtering the invited guests who refuse to come to the banquet as being a very specific message to the leaders of Jesus' own day. It's hard to think of a modern parallel that sheds any light for us. But the circumstance in which that slaughter takes place, that of giving a feast and having none of the people you invited show up, well that pretty much describes the situation in the Episcopal Church, and indeed in all of what we sometimes a bit presumptuously call the mainstream denominations.

Every week, we put on our best clothes, deck out the church, set the table, and celebrate a thanksgiving feast here in church. And every week, it seems, not only do the people we are hoping will show up stay home, so do more and more of our members. Despite our best evangelism efforts, the friends and neighbors we invite, and the people we hope will be attracted by our community, or our programs, or our buildings and grounds, or by our music, or simply by their own

need for spiritual connection, are not attracted, or if they come, they do not return, and even our own children drift away, as we grow ever older and fewer in number.

If the Kingdom of Heaven, the beloved community is us, then we are certainly like that man who gave a wedding banquet and the guests did not come.

But we seem to have a very hard time moving on to the next part of the story. We have noticed and bewailed the fact that the people we wanted to fill our pews, the people just like us, with whom we share values and interests and with whom we have common purpose, are not here. But we have, as a church, responded to that awareness by trying harder to reach those same people, or else wringing our hands and complaining about the diminishing of our community and about the way the world is going.

And what the parable is encouraging, even demanding that we do, is to go out into the street and invite everyone we see to come join the party. Not the people who are like us, not the people who make us comfortable, but our actual neighbors. The ones who are different from us. The ones who don't value the same things as we do, the ones who sing different songs, and dance different dances, and eat different foods and wear different clothes and tell different stories. And especially the ones who eat and wear only what they can find and don't dance or sing because they have nothing to dance or sing about, and who tell stories we

can't really understand because their lives and their needs are beyond our imagining.

These are the ones Jesus calls on us to serve, and, as the parable makes clear, he calls on us to serve them not as outsiders to whom we bring (or send) assistance, but as sisters and brothers whom we bring to the table with us.

We're really not very good at this. People who are different from us make us anxious and uncomfortable. We'd much rather help the needy at a distance – if not from ourselves then at least from our places. We can go to them with aid, work in soup kitchens, talk to homeless people on the street, even feed and shelter them in our church buildings at other times than when we gather as a community. But that's not really a welcome. That's not really the Kingdom of Heaven. And I would suggest to you (and in truth to myself) that we are never going to be able to truly welcome anyone to our church community whom we would be uncomfortable inviting to our own dinner table. For that is the real promise of the parables – that what the kingdom of heaven is really, truly, profoundly like, is home.

Amen.