

The Wedding Party

We return this morning to the parables of Jesus, those odd, off-kilter little stories that often seem to feature details in all the wrong places. Several of the parables that Jesus told that are recorded for us in the Gospels have a slightly different form and emphasis in each place they appear. Perhaps Jesus told the same story several times, at different times and places and with different emphases. Or perhaps those who heard the stories remembered them differently later, adding in details that Jesus left out or forgetting details that he had given, giving their own slant to the story based on the parts of Jesus' teaching that landed with them most fully. It's hard to know how these differences arose. The fact that there are differences, though, reminds me to be careful as I attempt to interpret those stories in my preaching. Stories, after all, are not the same as lectures. They appeal not so much to the logical mind as to the imagination. There is an ambiguity with stories – we are called to wrestle with the parables of Jesus in much the same way that the people of God are called to wrestle with our Loving Creator. The name Israel, to which we followers of Jesus make spiritual claim, means “One who strives with God,” as I hope you remember from the story of Jacob and the angel.

So, I'm wary when the lessons of a parable seem too clear, as has often been the case in traditional teaching on this parable. “The Kingdom of Heaven,” Jesus begins, “is like a king who arranged a wedding-feast for his son.” It has been an almost-unchallenged tenet of New Testament interpretation since the early days of the church that Jesus was talking about the wedding prepared by His Father, God, for Himself and His Bride, the Church. When Jesus talks about the invited guests who refused to come to the party, tradition tells us, he's talking about the Jews who rejected him as the Messiah. When he describes how they mistreated and killed the servants of the king who came to summon them to the feast, he's talking about the way the prophets had been mistreated and killed before him. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans less than 40 years after Jesus was betrayed and killed and that the city's inhabitants nearly all died. For centuries, that was interpreted as God's judgment on them for rejecting the Anointed One, for beating and killing the messengers. And when the king throws open the banquet to anyone off the street who will come, that has been treated as a straight-forward look into the future as well. After Jesus' rejection by his own people, the invitation to the Kingdom party is extended to the Gentiles, to us.

One of the problems with this traditional interpretation is that it gives rise to a dangerous theological outlook among Christians known as supersessionism. This is a theology that says that followers of Christ do not share in the promises of God made to the Children of Israel but instead that Christians have replaced the Jews as the Chosen of God. Not only is this directly in contravention of the teaching of Paul in his Letter to the Romans (in chapters 9-11, by the way, if you want to read it later) but it is also a dreadful smear on the nature of God. Can we really believe that the One who seeks the reconciliation of the whole world would discard the people through whom He was first known to the world? Would our Loving Creator betray Her first love?

For centuries, Christians found it convenient to apply the supersessionist approach. It's revelatory of one of the less attractive aspects of fallen human nature: it's easier to feel big when you're looking down on someone else. And so Christians derided Jews, mocked them, persecuted them, much as Christians blamed the entire tribe for the persecution of Jesus. And so, Jews were treated as second-class citizens throughout Christian Europe, expelled from their

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homes in Spain, England and other countries, forced to convert in those places and elsewhere. And shtetls were subject to pogroms in Russia and ghettos in Eastern Europe became concentration camps and now we remember with shame the Shoah, the Holocaust in which six million of Our Savior's cousins died. No "theology" which could lead to such things is worthy of the name.

So how then do we deal with this parable? Is it enough simply to say, "Well, it's not the Jewish people as a whole that condemns here but only the leaders of the Jews, the priests and scribes and Pharisees who turned against him who are in trouble?" That certainly helps defuse the bad theology but then what meaning does the parable have for us? As I've said, I'm with Charlie Scalise and Brevard Childs and the other scholars who preach Canonical Hermeneutics; that is to say, the truth that the Scriptures, to remain Scriptures, must have a continuing, God-ordained message to the world. The opponents of Jesus who were originally on the receiving end of this parable are long since turned to dust. What does it say to us? And what about this poor schlemiel without a wedding suit?

Can I just say that I love the fact that so many of Jesus' parables compare the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven to a wedding party? A few years ago, *The Christian Century*, a bi-monthly magazine I read for its theological insights, published a feature in which leading theologians were asked to give their preferred substitution for the phrase "the Kingdom of God;" kingdom being such an old-fashioned and patriarchal word and there being few kingdoms actually left to make it a good comparison for people. I think it was Brian McLaren who suggested "the Party of God." I don't use that because I think it can be misunderstood as equivalent to the Democratic or Republican or Communist Parties; I prefer Beloved Community. But I do love the image of the wedding party as the human equivalent of the time when God's will is truly done on earth as it is in heaven. Wedding parties are great! All that love and all that hope and all that joy! I wish I remembered mine better. Maybe I'll tell that story some day.

But the fact that Jesus starts this parable with plans for a blow-out party and the fact that the party does take place, albeit with a different guest list, makes me wonder about the more dire portions of the story. If the king's true desire is to throw a party to celebrate the wedding of his son, would he darken the day with mayhem and slaughter? That doesn't make much sense to me. So let's look at what Jesus says happens to those on the original guest list. To begin with, not all of them took part in the killing of the king's servants. Some of them simply "went away," accounting their own business to be more important than the king's invitation. We're not told what happens to them. They broke their relationship with the king and that has its own price. They missed the party. Now that part of the story has clear relevance to us. If we ignore the invitation of God to the Beloved Community, then we have condemned ourselves to live outside that wondrous reality. We've walked away from the party. Because we couldn't be bothered to come when invited, we've shut ourselves out of love and hope and joy. To be sure, whatever we've gone off for instead may bring us momentary enjoyment but it will never match the joy we might have found in the company of God and God's people, where everyone involved truly has our best interests at heart, where everyone knows us and loves us for who we are.

The murderers, Jesus says, are destroyed and their city burned. Well, OK, that sounds a little more reasonable to us but it's still an odd backdrop for the ultimate party in the life of the

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Beloved Son. Jesus may simply be turning the expectations of his enemies against them as he has just done in the previous parable. I skipped that one last week in order to talk about Francis of Assisi and World Communion Sunday but if you look back at Matthew 21:33-46, you'll see what I'm talking about. It's another vineyard parable, this one about tenants who tried to steal it from its owner by killing his servants and his son. Before Jesus points out to the priests and Pharisees that they are just like this in terms of the Kingdom of God, they eagerly tell him that the evil tenants should be put to "a miserable death." So it may be that Jesus is simply reminding them of their own bloodthirstiness.

Or it may be something else. When I find references in the Gospels to fire, whether it be in the teachings and stories of Jesus or of his cousin, John the Baptizer, I wonder if it's an image of the Holy Spirit that they have in mind. In the context of this story, are the destruction of the murderers and the burning of their city meant to suggest the inner workings of the Spirit in the lives of those who turn their backs on Jesus and the prophets and upon their teaching? Peter denied Jesus and was consumed with regret until the Risen One shared breakfast with him at the shore. Paul persecuted Jesus' followers and, by extension, Jesus himself, until a burning light struck him blind and the voice of the Crucified broke through his self-righteousness. I am reminded of the words of the old hymn in which God reveals the nature of the fiery trials we must sometimes endure: "Fear not, I am with thee! I only design / Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." Will murderers be allowed into the party in the end? Well, there's certainly Paul. And I think of the words of another song, not a hymn but a song by Tom Waits, which I know best in a cover by Johnny Cash, "Down There By the Train." "There's a place I know / where the train goes slow / where the sinners can be washed / in the blood of the lamb / there's a river by the trestle / down by Sinner's Grove / down where the Willow and the Dogwood grows / down there by the train... there's a golden moon / that shines up through the mist / I know that your name / will be on that list / There's no eye for an eye / there's no tooth for a tooth / I saw Judas Iscariot carrying John Wilkes Booth / down there by the train..." A different, beautiful vision of the Beloved Community.

And then what of the man without a wedding robe? In this part of the story, I find an illustration of the natural consequences of clinging to sin, to rebellion, to brokenness, in the very midst of the divine celebration, when redemption, reconciliation and healing are freely offered. I often find in the parables of Jesus references to the words of the prophet Isaiah. Listen to this, from Isaiah 61:10: "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For God has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." Commentators on this parable have argued back and forth for centuries over whether or not kings actually provided party clothes for their guests but that debate seems unnecessary to me. Jesus is talking to a group who know the Hebrew Scriptures backwards and forwards. They would have known he was referencing these scriptures and in them it is clear that God will provide the spiritual adornment necessary to come to the party: consecration, garments of salvation and robes of righteousness.

So, again, what's the point for us? What lesson can we take from the Mystery of the Missing Wedding Garment? In his wonderful modern parable, "The Great Divorce," C.S. Lewis tells a tale of a group of travelers stranded in a grey country who are offered the opportunity to travel to a land of surpassing beauty and joy. Some make the transition but some refuse, even after

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visiting the blessed realm. There are things from the old land they refuse to give up, baggage, idols and attitudes. In Lewis' work, the metaphors are clear. Those things that hold the travelers back are easily understood as selfishness, cruelty, pettiness, fear and other destructive human attributes. Lewis meant his work to be understood as a parable of the afterlife but I think it works just as well to illuminate our lives in this plane of existence. God invites us to a rich, full and joyous life. It is by clinging to our bad habits, poor choices and defeatist attitudes that we miss out on what is supposed to be a party. The servants that bind us and throw us out of the feast are of our own devising.

Barbara Brown Taylor, once named as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language, says this in her sermon, "Wedding Dress:" "Like the underdressed guest, some of us have rolled in here without thinking much about it. We have showed up with our spiritual shirttails hanging out, lining up at the buffet as if no one could see the ways in which we too have refused to change - refusing to surrender our fears and resentments, refusing to share our wealth, refusing to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the old clothes we wear to the king's banquet - the clothes we prefer to the wedding robe of new life. The parable of the underdressed guest is not about establishing a dress code for worship. Jesus's point is much larger. No, he is saying that just because the kingdom welcomes all ("the good and the bad"), and God makes the "rejected stone the cornerstone" does not take away the honor and status of being at the great banquet. This parable is here because of the temptation of the followers of the reign of God to take for granted our being able to gather around the table of welcome and grace. Is this not the greatest danger for all for our church communities? My church does this all the time. I call it the "just" disease. It's "just" preaching. It is "just" a hymn. It is "just" communion." Reverend Taylor reminds us that we are called to celebrate all aspects of our life and especially those parts of life that we identify as corporate worship. The party is here, now.

Here is something more from Isaiah, another wedding party scripture in 25:6-8: "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain (God) will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; (God) will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth." In this parable, Jesus reminds us of the way things should be, the difference between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of Heaven. God has promised before that all people will be invited to the party. This should be a reminder to us, the servants of God, that we have a commission to invite all people, good and bad, to the banquet. It is not for us to judge who is worthy to come and not. It is for us to spread the good news that all are invited.

In his sermon on the wedding garment, St. Augustine said that the proper wedding garment was love. "It is not love of just any kind. Many people of bad conscience appear to love one another, but you will not find in them *the love that springs from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith*. Only that kind of love is the wedding garment." Are those the clothes that we wear this morning? Have we put on the wedding robe of new life in loving relationship to God and our neighbors that Christ Jesus has freely offered us? Or are we still trying to wear our old, grubby clothes and live in the old, grubby way? Have we changed for the party?