

Parable not Prophecy
Matthew 22:1-14
Sermon by Missy Kauffman Schrock
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Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

I was challenged in the fall of 2017 to preach on this passage from Matthew and believe me, it was a challenge!

This parable of the wedding banquet is the last in a series of three parables that Jesus tells following his arrival in Jerusalem and the clearing of the temple courts. The first two parables are stern and trend toward violence, but this last parable...wow! There are mutinous wedding guests, an angry king, torture, arson and murder! How was I, a peace-loving Mennonite, to sort all of this out? Each

time I read through this passage I became increasingly unsettled. At the time, I was working at *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*, and while I was sitting in my office I had the brilliant idea to ask our New Testament professor, Loren Johns, what I was supposed to do with this passage and he said, “Yeah. What do you do with that?” Thanks, Loren.

But then he said something that did help. He said, “remember that parables are not prophecy and sometimes the allegory of the parable is over the top to make a point.” Indeed. This is a parable. This is not prophecy. It is over the top. And, it does make a point. I decided to preach this sermon again because it seems like we are living in “over the top” times and I feel like this parable speaks a message to us about how to stay in relationship with Jesus and each other.

Bear with me as we break this story down a bit.

God is the king and Jesus is the son. The invited guests who choose not to show up are the religious leaders in the temple who are already skeptical about Jesus as the Messiah. The people who eventually come to the banquet are the tax collectors and prostitutes and gentiles and non-observant Jews – as it says, both the good and the bad. This is a fairly simple interpretation of the main players.

Going deeper into the allegory, we could say that the first set of servants who are sent out by the king represent the prophets of old. They are rejected, tortured and murdered for reminding the guests of the invitation to the covenant of God’s salvation. The next set of servants that the king sends out are also rejected, tortured and murdered and we could say that they represent the contemporary missionaries of the good news, like John the Baptist, of the invitation to the new covenant of God’s salvation in Jesus.

On top of all of that symbolism, there are burning cities, foreshadowing the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE as God's judgement on those who rejected the new thing God was doing through Jesus. And there are improperly dressed guests who are thrown out of the feast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, perhaps as a prologue to the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25.

In any case, this is a crazy busy, action-packed, scary kind of parable. And, for the religious leaders standing in the temple grounds listening to Jesus right after he drove the money-changers out of the courtyard, the images of violence, burning and judgement had to have been frightening. But, Jesus was making a point!

He was saying to the Pharisees, the "invited guests," that their disregard for the prophets, their legalistic judgement, their comfort in the religious status quo was in jeopardy. He was saying that they could either go about their business, whether that was routine following of the law or outright persecution of those who challenged their authority, or they could come to the party to which they had already been invited as part of God's chosen people of Israel. If they chose *not* to accept the invitation, then they would be subject to God's judgement. And, if they came and didn't really join in the celebration, they would be bounced.

So, a couple thousand years later, what do we learn from this parable? Who are we in this story? Certainly not God, although, there may be times when we identify with the righteous anger of God when others don't listen to us. Probably not Jesus, although, there may be times when we feel like we aren't getting the recognition we deserve for the great things we are doing for the Kingdom.

Sometimes we may feel like the servants – persecuted, demoralized, tortured for simply delivering a message.

Are we the invited guests? Are we so wrapped up in our own sense of righteousness, our certainty about what is holy and acceptable, what comfortably reinforces our power and privilege that we are blinded to the invitation of God’s salvation? Are we unaware of the new thing God is doing through Jesus, facilitated by the Holy Spirit and tested in the community of faith? Is it “safer” to turn our backs on the invitation, to bully the messengers?

I am disheartened by our current world-wide religious and political rhetoric, but particularly so in the U.S. I am disheartened by my own participation in the fray that makes it so easy for me as a white, middle class, educated American to take the easy way out—to protect my status quo and to turn my back on the prophetic witness of sisters and brothers who are different from me. Sometimes I am an invited guest and dare I say that sometimes *we Mennonites* are invited guests. Joel Stoltzfus wrote an article in *Mennonite World Review* a couple of years ago called “Fundamentally flawed: how Mennonites failed to be faithful,” and it reinforced for me how biblical fundamentalism has influenced the Mennonite church and allowed us to nitpick ourselves to death, splitting over inconsequential things like suspenders and coverings and Sunday school and music. He says:

Our relatives from a generation or two ago swallowed fundamentalist theological innovations hook, line and sinker. They did so without realizing the divergent path this represented. It might have begun with a subtle change of focus, but the difference in final outcomes is huge. We have gone

from a question of “Is it Christlike?” to “Is it biblical?” and many of us don’t even know why that’s a problem.

The religious leaders Jesus confronted in the temple had become religious fundamentalists. They had made an idol of the law and its enforcement was the test of faithfulness. They became blinded to the dynamic story of God’s salvation throughout history and were unable to see the new thing God was doing in Jesus. When we stop asking “is it Christlike?” and only ask “is it biblical?” we overshadow the Good News of our invitation to the feast. We become like the invited guests in the story. We interpret parables as if they were prophecy.

Are we the people from the streets? Do we identify with those who have been chosen seemingly from out of the blue to participate in something exciting, nourishing, and new? I hope we do! Because in spite of our desire for certainty, safety and privilege, we are all looking for something to inspire us, something to fill the hungry place inside us that wants to go to the feast. We are all seeking an opportunity to meet Jesus, the life of the party, the new thing God is doing.

This is the point. The feast is open to all who say “yes” to the invitation. It is expansive. It is extended to, as the text says, *the good and the bad*. And, if we say “yes,” we are going to encounter Jesus in ways we haven’t even dreamed about.

Imagine being at the party with a multitude of others. You’re there with farmers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs, artists and teachers, believers and seekers, brown, black, white, hippopotami and armadillos, runners and walkers, bikers and quilters, singers and helpers, blind, deaf, short, tall, beautiful people from every tribe and nation. And, Jesus is there among you. You have not said yes to a party where you are the only guest. Each person will encounter Jesus with a different

experience, a different story of how they met him – with a joy-filled high-five, or a quiet whisper in their ear, or a deep, warm hug. And, then, at the party, you begin to share with each other how you met Jesus. How in meeting him, you have been changed. How you have been inspired to embrace the Good News of God’s new thing. And, as you share with each other, your understanding of the expansiveness of God’s salvation grows with each story you hear. *This is the point.*

This is a parable, not prophecy. This is a story about keeping our eyes and ears open to what new thing God is doing, not a frightening apocalyptic vision of what will happen if you reject Jesus. It is a reminder to us that getting bogged down in the letter of the law, succumbing to fundamentalism, is contrary to the generous invitation of the feast. It is a reminder to keep our hearts and minds open to the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit, discerned within the community of faith, to keep asking “is it Christlike?”

The party is underway and we are all invited to meet Jesus at the feast. Come encounter Jesus with each other. Share your experiences, bear fruit, become allies, appreciate your differences, celebrate the new thing God is doing among you in the risen Christ. Come. Come to the feast.

Amen