

“All Prepared, But No Guests”

Matthew 22: 1-14

I probably should have given everyone a word of warning before I read our Scripture for the morning, saying something like this text is not for the faint of heart so proceed with caution. Sure it is not like some of the other more difficult texts found within our Bible, stories such as the near sacrifice of Isaac, the story of David giving the order to kill off Bathsheba’s husband simply because he wanted her all to himself. Nor is it like the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree seemingly for no reason at all.

No our parable this morning does not go to these extremes but it does come close. After all, not only does the king get angry when his first invited guests refuse to come to the feast, he responds to their refusal by killing them all, destroying their cities in the process. And if that wasn’t bad enough, after filling his banquet hall with people from the streets, both good and bad people I might add, the king sees a guest, has him thrown into the darkness where that will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, all because this particular guest did not have on the proper wedding attire. Like I said, this parable may not be as difficult to discuss as some of the other stories in our Bible but it does come close.

Now, usually when texts like this one come up in our reading, smart preachers tend to avoid them, going with something a little more tolerable, something that cultivates an atmosphere full of warm fuzzies... something like Paul's chapter in first Corinthians where he reminds us that hope, faith and love abide, and the greatest of these is love. This is so much easier to hear and understand than having to read about someone being thrown into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (I just like saying that phrase. It just kind of rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?)

However, as I have lived with this text this past week, I have come to realize we do a disservice to these difficult texts, even more so, a disservice to ourselves when we dismiss them so quickly simply because they make us uncomfortable. I'll be the first to say that we would prefer to forget these ugly stories exist rather than to admit they were added to our sacred text for a reason...that reason being these difficult texts have the ability to confront us, confront us with the dangers which arise when we as people of faith allow anything other than God's love and grace to be our guides along our faith journeys.

So for us to engage this difficult text and to have a better understanding of it, I invite us to look at some of the context which surrounds it. We need to know that Matthew is writing for a community who is struggling. They have experienced Jesus Christ as the Messiah and now this life-changing belief has separated them

from others. Matthew's community is no longer accepted at the synagogues. And they are certainly not embraced by the Romans. These newcomers to God's story of welcome to whom Matthew writes are trying to figure out where they belong. They are trying to find their place at the Table.

It is important for us to remember this as we read this particular parable of Matthew's. It is important for us to remember that his community has been rejected by the religious institutions of their birth all because now, they interpret the story of God's people through the lens of Jesus, proclaiming him to be Lord and Savior. Matthew's community is hurt by this rejection and it is to this rejection which Matthew speaks. He realizes that his community is "caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin on how to be faithful to the God of Abraham, especially after being told time and time again, that they don't belong." This is important because, as one commentator shares, this parable is not a story about a Jewish-Christian dispute. And we step into danger when we allow this story to be used this way. Rather this parable represents the pain of a community torn from its family and is now trying to justify itself. They are now trying to find their place within the larger story of God.

So, like I said, Matthew speaks to the pain of his community. He does so through this parable by giving them both a word of grace and a word of caution. The word of grace comes in the re-affirmation of God's welcome for all to come to

the feast. This invitation has been extended to God's people since the beginning of time. It is given to all, both good and bad. This invitation is not going to change simply because they were and are rejected by others. God's invitation remains the same, to come to the table, to come partake in the heavenly feast, to come and be satisfied.

Matthew then goes one step further and reminds his community that accepting this invitation has always been their choice. They and so many others like them can decide whether or not to come to the feast. No one is going to force them to come. Their choice does not change the invitation, Nor will it ever change. Matthew again reminds his community that although they may be struggling to find their place within Jerusalem's religious institutional landscape, they will always have a place at God's Table. They will always be invited to partake in the holy banquet that is God's Kingdom. That's the very definition of grace for us as people of faith.

However, Matthew is fully aware how sometimes grace given turns into passiveness on the part of the receiver. Let me say that again: Matthew is fully aware how sometimes grace given turns into passiveness on the part of the receiver. So he offers a word of caution as well. This word of caution is spoken to Matthew's community and to us as modern day disciples through the second part of this parable. Matthew tells us that "Sure, as newcomers to God's story of

welcome, we can easily interpret this first part of the parable as all the times the Israelites rejected God, especially all the times when God sent prophets to the people, hoping that the people would come back into relationship with God, Even after they had discovered all the other gods of the land, God was still there, waiting for them to come to the feast, yet still the people refused. But...but, as newcomers to God's story of welcome, don't get too smug yet. The second part of the parable stands as a word of caution for us newcomers as well.

Mathew reminds his community and us that it is not enough for us to simply show up to the feast. As followers of Jesus Christ, as the people of God there are certain standards, certain expectations of how we live out our faith in a broken and hurting world.

Our faith pushes us beyond just showing up to feast, only looking out for ourselves. "When we enter into relationship with Christ, we are called into a deeper relationship with others. We are called to see the needs of our neighbor and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Christian faith is not something we can pay lip service to; it requires a transformation of our lives. When we follow Jesus and look to helping our neighbors, our wedding robes are put on. We engage in the work of God's Kingdom by accepting the invitation fully, not just to attend and see who's there" [but to become partners in the more often than not, frustratingly difficult work of grace and love of the Kingdom of God]." Coming to the feast is

the first part of discipleship. Becoming transformed into the people God created and calls us to be is the second part.

Or let me say it this way... Fred Craddock, the renowned Disciples preacher liked to share a story of his early years in ministry. "Many years ago, when Fred Craddock was a young preacher out of seminary, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. At that time, Oak Ridge was rapidly expanding. Lots of people were moving to town to help in the construction work. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. The trailer park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought his church ought to reach out to them. So at the next Board meeting Fred recommended a plan to reach out to the newcomers. "Oh, I don't know" said the chairman of the board. "They might not fit in here very well." Fred said, "But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us." But Fred got resistance to the idea. They finally decided to table the discussion and deal with it at their next business meeting. At that meeting a member said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church you have to own property in the county." "I'll second that motion," said another man. Fred was mortified and spoke against it. But in the end, the motion passed. As a result, no effort was made to reach out to the newcomers. Soon thereafter Fred left that church. Twenty years later, Fred and his wife were driving past Oak Ridge on a

trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church, his wife had never seen it. So Fred decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred told his wife that painful story about the church refusing to reach out to newcomers. It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area. But they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. There was a big parking lot out front full of cars, trucks, motor homes and even motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot they saw a big sign in front of the church. It said, "BBQ: All You Can Eat." It was a restaurant! Fred and his wife went inside and the place was packed with all kinds of people—white and black and Hispanic. Rich and poor. Southerners and northerners. Fred said to his wife, "It's a good thing this isn't a church anymore. If it were, these people would not be allowed in."

You see, it is not enough to know that we have an invitation to the feast and for us to simply show up when the dinner is ready. Our call as followers of Jesus Christ pushes us beyond that. It transforms us. It helps us realize that until everyone comes to the feast, we cannot celebrate because our joy is not complete. The Kingdom of God has never been about us simply showing up. It has always been about us being in relationship with our God, being in relationship with neighbors, being in the relationship with the people who don't look like, who don't think like us, who don't act like us.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ, whether we accepted the first round of invitations to the dinner or whether we are newcomers to God's story of welcome, being a follower of Jesus Christ is about engaging in the difficult work of the Kingdom of God, work that pushes us beyond our comfort zones, work that brings us face to face with the other, work that constantly reminds us just how amazing a gift God's grace really is.

Because as we all know... Grace is not an exclusive privilege. It is a gift given to each and every one of God's Beloved children. God's grace changes us. It transforms us. It helps us respond to God's call with integrity and hope. So knowing this, today and all days, may we respond to the gift of God's grace, not simply by showing up at the feast, but by working to make sure the welcome is wide for all of God's people. Amen.