

All Are Welcome (Matthew 22:1-14)

Let us pray. Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A first reading of today's scripture reminded me of a cartoon entitled "Born Loser." In it, a man is reminiscing about his younger days in the military. He says to two little girls who are listening to him and hanging on to his every word, "Yes! I survived World War II--from the beachheads of Normandy to Berlin! Somebody up there must really like me." To which, one the young girls responded, "Maybe somebody up there doesn't want you."

At first glance, that is the way God comes across in this parable from Matthew. God seems to not want a lot of people. In it, we read about a king who destroyed the population of a city, and then ordered that the city be burnt to the ground. Later, this same king threw some poor guy out of his house, where, we are told, the man was doomed to weep and to gnash his teeth. Yes, the king sounds as if he does not have much use for a lot of people. He just gets rid of them. He seems to not want people.

It brings to mind the story of the family who invited the minister and his large family over for dinner. At the table, the hostess turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?" "I don't know what to say," the girl answered. "Just say what you hear Mommy say." So the little girl obediently bowed her head and said, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?!"

Surely this is not what the gospel lesson is trying to teach us. Surely Matthew does not want us to go away from the text with the message that God does not like or want people. I think we need to take a closer look at the text.

Granted, the passage does seem rather violent and harsh. In it, we meet a king who was preparing to throw a wedding banquet for his son. When dinner was ready, the king sent his slaves out to summon those who had been invited to the wedding banquet. But they would not come. The king then sent another group of his slaves to go and say to those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, "Look, I have

prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet" (Matthew 22:4).

How did those invited to the wedding banquet respond to this? We are told that "they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them" (Matthew 22:5-6).

How did the king respond when he found out what had happened? We are told that, "The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy'" (Matthew 22:7-8).

See, I told you this was a difficult passage. I warned you that the king does not seem to care for people all that much. And frankly, when I think of this parable, it makes me a little nervous about my cousin Shaun and his new wife Erin. Several months ago, Katie and I received an invitation to their wedding in St. Louis. We had every intention of attending. But a couple of weeks before the big day, I learned that an important class was scheduled for that day. I did not go to the wedding. If Shaun and his new wife are like this king, might they be sending hit men from the east to get back at us for not being at their wedding? Of course not. At least, I hope not.

Thankfully for us, the parable doesn't end on that note. Let us see what happens next.

The king gave his servants further instructions. "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Obediently, they went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad. Soon the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Isn't it a good thing that we read further? In doing so, we discover some wonderful things about God. God does want people. God wants us. God wants us to be at the banquet. God is one who invites and welcomes all to the heavenly banquet. And God is one who doesn't give up on us. God doesn't want us to be left out in the cold. Even if we don't RSVP or don't show up, even if we make light of it, even if we think that what we are working on at the present moment is more important,

God keeps on sending invitations to remind us that we are indeed wanted at the heavenly banquet. God keeps extending invitations. God keeps right on loving us. God keeps right on desiring to be with us.

But hold on, just a second. Just as we begin to bask in this wonderful news, we are hit with the last part of the parable. The king noticed someone who was not properly attired.

It reminds me of the story about the man who walked into a restaurant. He was stopped at the door and denied admission. "Sir, you don't have on a coat or a tie. Proper dress is required here." So the man went out to his truck and put on an old jacket. When he came back in, he said, "I would like to be seated now." The waiter replied, "Sorry. You don't have a tie." So the man went back out to his truck and grabbed the jumper cables. He wrapped the jumper cables around his neck and went back inside. "Now I have met your dress code. I demand to be seated at once." The waiter replied, "Okay. But don't go trying to start anything!"

Unfortunately, Matthew's story does not have such a happy ending for the guest. The king went up to the man and said, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man was speechless. Then the king said, and I quote, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!"

There goes our joyous ending. Seemingly, there goes our picture of a God who wants and who loves us. Yes, I have even found examples of this very scripture being used by ministers in the past to condemn men who did not wear ties to church and to condemn women who did not wear dresses. But such interpretations miss the point.

You see, in this parable, God is not just angry because someone isn't following the dress code. Jesus is not arguing that everyone should wear robes to dinner. No, for Matthew, the robe represented righteousness. The robe meant living in a right relationship with God.

Matthew was deeply distressed that in his young congregation, there were false prophets and false disciples. There were tares right there among the wheat. And Matthew pulled out all of the stops to warn his flock that they needed not just to say they were disciples of Jesus but to act like disciples of Jesus.

He told his congregation, and he tells us, that God loves us too much to leave us the way we are. We are called to a higher standard. The bar has been raised. We are to put on the robes of righteousness. We are called to follow the teachings of Jesus. And Matthew reinforced his lesson by pointing out an awful truth. Those who are not in God's house, those who do not follow Jesus' teaching, those who are not in a relationship with God will regret it. They will discover that life without a relationship with God through Christ Jesus brings only weeping and a gnashing of teeth. No joy is found in such a place.

Now who do you think the king is in this parable? That's right, the king is God. What do you think the wedding banquet represents? That's right, the wedding banquet represents heaven or God's kingdom.

So here's the story in a nutshell. The king is God. The wedding banquet is heaven or God's kingdom. It points to what things will look like when God's will is finally done on earth, as in heaven. The slaves are the prophets. The people destroyed in the city are the unworthy in Israel, especially the leaders who were grilling Jesus right before he told this parable. The next slaves sent out are the Christian missionaries. Those attending the banquet are the new Christian community, made up of Jews and now Gentiles. And the person not properly dressed is a false prophet or false disciple. He is one who has accepted the invitation of the gospel but has refused to live a gospel life.

And here's the good news of the story in a nutshell. God does want people. God does love people. God does want us. God does love us. God reaches out to us again and again to invite us into the wonderfully prepared place of love and peace and hope and joy. And even after we have accepted the invitation, God does not give up on us. God continues to help us to be better disciples. God continues to lead us in paths of righteousness. God continues to want us. God continues to love us. God continues to invite us to abundant life.

But many in our world still have not yet responded to the invitation. That is the way it is with many, even today. When told about and invited to the heavenly banquet, many tend to not bother RSVPing or showing up. Many still tend to make light of it, effectively thinking that it is not that important. Many tend to go off and do their own thing.

In the scripture, one went to his farm, and another went to his business. With many in our world, it is a job, school, a project, soccer practice, or a Chiefs' game. Many mistakenly think that what they are working on or dealing with at the present moment is more important than the invitation to the heavenly banquet. And many even mistreat those who call them to the heavenly banquet by being mean to them or by being rude or disrespectful to them.

I am so thankful that you and I are not in that category today. When I look out at you this morning, it is obvious to me that you took God's invitation seriously. You heard the good news about the heavenly banquet. You responded. You showed up. I find myself encouraged and uplifted that you have chosen to witness to God's love by faithfully attending this worship service this Lord's Day. I rejoice that you take your relationship with God through Christ seriously and that you are here to strengthen and nourish that relationship.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord for not giving up on a single one of us. Thanks be to God for continuing to seek us out. Thanks be to God for inviting us week after week, day after day, moment after moment. Thanks be to God for welcoming us to the heavenly banquet with a love that is too grand to describe. Truly, thanks be to God. Amen.

--Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; October 12, 2008