

October 15, 2017
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

It Should Be About a Banquet

The Kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a banquet. If our parable stopped right there today, then that would be enough. It would be enough of a word of encouragement. It would be enough of a sermon to know that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a banquet, a party. That God wants to celebrate. That God wants to invite us to a big feast that God has been planning since the beginning of time. That would be enough for us to know the good news today. But that's not all Jesus tells us about in this parable. Jesus tells us about a king throwing a banquet, who is also hurt that people don't come. Jesus tells us about a king inviting people over and over to a feast, who is also angry when people ignore it. Jesus tells us about a king sparing no expense for his guests, who is also ready to let others take their place when they choose not to come.

It would have been enough just to tell us about the wedding banquet.

After all, God's heavenly wedding banquet is a constant theme in the Bible. The great big celebration at the end of the age, when God will take all of God's people to be with God forever. And it will be like a

wedding, the Bible says, when all promises are fulfilled and creation is complete. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. And the only thing left to do, after that, will be to party, according to the scripture. To have a great big bash with the very best food and the very best wine. And the very best china and silver and linens and decor and music. The very best, that's what you prepare for your guests on an important occasion like this. And that's what the Kingdom of heaven will be like. It will be like a wedding banquet, the best kind of party, prepared for us by God.

It would be enough just to talk about that. But Jesus doesn't just talk about that today. Today he talks about what happens when it should be about the banquet but it isn't. When people choose to disregard God's celebration and make excuses not to come. Yes, they have been invited, but they have other things to do. And if they didn't have these other things, then, of course, of course they would come. But they have meetings and appointments and crops to sow and business to complete. It says in the parable that these people 'make light of' the banquet invitation. The word in Greek. Amaylay. It means to neglect, or to

ignore. These people essentially blow off the king. But then they go a step farther. They abuse those bringing the invitations. They mistreat those telling them to come. They even go so far as to kill them.

It should be about the banquet, but it isn't about the banquet. So the King goes on a rampage. And he sends out troops against those who rudely rejected him. He burns down their cities. He kills those who hurt his servants. And then the king force-ably fills his banquet hall with anyone and everyone around. Because it's about the banquet. And the party must go on. Except for those without proper wedding attire. Who are thrown out into the teeth-gnashing outer darkness. It was should have been about the banquet, the great celebration of God. But by the end of the parable, it's hard to imagine it's much of a party. It's hard to imagine feeling festive in the company of this king who is so vengeful. Rage does not make for a good party atmosphere. It would have been enough for Jesus just to talk about the wedding banquet, but now we have a banquet with a crazy, angry King who gathers anyone and everyone and insists that they show up and enjoy themselves.

I am glad that this is not the only story about the Kingdom of heaven.

And I'm glad that we are encouraged to wonder about this story. And to try to understand where Jesus is coming from. Why would he describe such an angry God? Why all the divine retribution and rage and violence? WHY, that's exactly what we should be asking of this parable. It's what we should always be asking when we trying to interpret things. When we are trying to understand people and the world. Our job is to ask WHY, what's going on? What's the reason? Because there IS a reason. There is a reason that people act the way they do. There is a reason people say scary things. It's because they are scared. People say hurtful things, is because they have been hurt. People are stressed or scared. Pain creates pain. Nastiness begets more nastiness. Our job is to ask, what's really going on here? To understand why.

So let's look at what is going on here with this parable. Let's look at the context of this story. In the chapter just before this, Jesus did two big things, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and he flipped the tables of the money changers in the temple. Jesus challenged the kingdoms of this world. He challenged the power of the Jewish leaders. But the powerful

don't like to be challenged. Jesus knew he was crossing a line. He was forcing the Jewish leaders and the scribes and priests to show what their hearts were really set on. And it wasn't God's invitation to the heavenly banquet. Over and over, Jesus had asked them to be part of God's celebration. But over and over, they had rejected him as they had rejected the prophets before him. Jesus invited them to believe that God didn't care about being squeaky clean on the outside. God cared about being squeaky clean on the inside. God didn't just want busy hands. God wanted pure hearts. God wanted laughter and joy and hope and connection for everyone. God wanted a party for creation.

But the religious leaders didn't want a party. They didn't want to seek God's way. They wanted their way. And they rejected Jesus. And we can see in the parable that Jesus took offense to that. Jesus was human enough to be hurt by those who 'made light' of his invitation. Maybe you know that kind of hurt too. Maybe you know what it's like to have someone blow off your important occasion. After you planned it with them in mind and took the time to plan for them, then they told you that they couldn't make it. But you knew they could have. Maybe it was a

dinner party. A graduation. A birthday. A Christmas dinner. A retirement. You invited those you cared about and wanted to celebrate with. You wanted to offer them your best. And you did your best to make it happen. You called. You emailed. You talked to them in person. But then the day arrived and the excuses came in. Sorry. Can't make it. Something else has come up.

I remember that feeling. I was going to go to a New Year's Eve party with a boy. And I had driven back to college early from Christmas break just for him. I gave up time at home, time with my family. But I ended up alone in my empty dorm room on New Year's Eve. He never came. He never even called. He just never showed up for the party. And I don't think there was a time I felt lonelier. Maybe you know what that's like. To feel hurt and angry and disappointed when someone makes light of an invitation.

For God's people, it should have been about the banquet. In the context, in the 'why' and 'what's going on' of this parable, we can understand how angry Jesus was and how hurt he felt that he gave his best to God's people, but they had better things to do. They blew him off, the people

of Israel, his own people, who should have wanted to come to God's banquet, who should have been all about God's banquet; but they weren't. And Jesus was broken-hearted. God was broken-hearted that these people who were 'God's people' had better things to do than to share in God's joy.

But there's more. There's more to the context of this parable. Bible scholars say that when this story was written down in Matthew's gospel it was around the year 80 or 90 CE. That's about 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Just before that, in the year 70, a catastrophic thing happened. There was a Jewish uprising and the Roman empire responded by sending its troops into Jerusalem and destroying the city and burning the Temple to the ground. Sounds kind of like what happened in our parable, doesn't it? The violence and death and chaos.

The early Christian community saw it happen and they probably saw this as God's retribution. Or the rejection of Jesus, for his terrible crucifixion. The Jewish leaders were rejected and their city burned to the ground. And new people were invited to God's banquet, the 'anyone and

everyone' off the streets, the Gentiles of the early church; they were now unexpectedly brought in to the Kingdom of God.

That's the 'why' and the 'what's going on' behind this story. All along it should have been about a banquet. It should have been about the celebration of God's great love for the world and God's desire to make everything and everyone complete. But because of context, because of history, because of hurtful experiences, this parable becomes a warning. A warning to us about priorities. A warning not to make light of the invitation to God's feast.

So, what's the word for us today? Matthew tells us as followers of Jesus, that it should be about the banquet. That the invitation is real and that it is real for you and me. And that if we refuse to come, we will miss it. If we don't make time for the banquet, God will find others who will. That life with God isn't about having busy hands, but having pure hearts.

That's what the apostle Paul is saying in his letter today too. Life should be about the banquet that is to come. So, he say, do whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing to God.

Don't make light of the invitation to God's party, the gospel of Matthew

says. Don't make light of the Kingdom that is to come. Don't blow it off. Don't water it down to a 'whatever' level. And say whatever to God. Whatever, it's all the same. Don't make faith a mile wide and an inch deep. This should be about a banquet. With God. In the Kingdom to come. With one another. With anyone and everyone from the whole wide world. That's what it should be about here too. That's what we are preparing for here together. For the feast that is to come. For the life beyond this life. And if we blow it off now, we might just be blowing it off later too.

It should be about a banquet. For God. And for us. That's the good news. That God wants to celebrate with us. Many are called, few are chosen. Some are ready and others are not. Sometimes we are prepared and sometimes we aren't. But God's desire, God's longing will always be for us to come to be a part of the feast. And in Jesus Christ, we know that God will do anything to make it so. God will give everything to reach us. God will go to hell and back, so we can have a place at the table. It should be about the banquet that God has prepared for us. The party that is worth waiting for.