

November 26th, 2023

Matthew 22:1-14 “What Do We Deserve?”

Last week I sort of glossed over some of the more disturbing aspects of our scripture reading in favor of getting to the biggest takeaway which was, “It’s not the number of talents you have that counts, it’s how you use them.” Poor Lori had to read this awful text where a slave was punished rather harshly for not making a good investment with the money his master entrusted him. I re-watched the video from last week and you could see the concern on Lori’s face as she read the last verse, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” But I made it a point to explain how slavery in the first century Roman era was different than how we understand it now and that the Bible isn’t advocating for or justifying slavery. The point of the parable is, “Be good stewards of what we have,” not, “It’s okay to abuse slaves when they disappoint you, and by the way God is like the cruel slave master.” I believe I modeled a decent example of re-directing people’s attention away from an otherwise terrifying story.

This week we have “The Parable of the Wedding Banquet” which honestly makes last week’s parable seem tame in comparison. I love you honey! Thank you for signing up to be my worship leader this week! You’re the best! The Gospel of Matthew seems to be the gift that keeps on giving this month. This one is so bad that I had to see which of the other gospels includes it. Mark’s gospel doesn’t have it, probably because it’s too complicated and doesn’t get to the point quickly enough. Mark just wants to tell people about Jesus moving on to the next town where there are folks who need to be healed and hungry people who need to be fed. John doesn’t include it either because I imagine it doesn’t have anything to do with the cosmic Christ being the light of the world, so why bother. For a moment I thought maybe it was another “Matthew original” like the one two weeks ago where the gospel writer had angels separating the good from the evil and throwing the evil ones in a furnace

of fire where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matthew sure seems to be stuck on this image of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” because this is the third week in a row where he talks about this. But lo and behold, Luke, bless his heart, has “The Parable of the Great Dinner” in chapter 14 of his gospel. Here’s a synopsis of Luke’s version – A man sent his servant out to gather the guests who he had invited to a dinner that he was hosting. The servant came back and said, “All these folks had lame excuses for why they couldn’t come.” The master got angry and said, “Oh yeah? Then go out and gather up all the poor and hungry you can find and bring them here to the dinner.” The slave said, “But what if there aren’t enough? What if there’s still room?” The master said, “Then go out into other towns and on the back roads and bring more people in until they fill my house!” The end.

Matthew’s version has this temperamental king who sends multiple servants out to gather the people who he invited to a wedding banquet. Those folks didn’t want to come either, but Matthew indicates they tortured and killed the king’s slaves for bothering to ask. In response, the king retaliates by sending his soldiers to kill the people who mistreated his slaves and for good measure he burned their cities to the ground too! Then when he tells his servants to go out and gather up anyone they can find regardless of whether they had an invitation, he gets upset at one of the guests for not being properly dressed! He was so mad that he had his servants tie this poor underdressed guy up and thrown out into the “outer darkness” where there will be ...? Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew, Matthew. You’re killing me here man! I’ve got a congregation who needs to hear the good news that God’s table is big and that God’s hospitality is even bigger, but you’re saying I’ve got to tell them that they need to be properly dressed or else they’ll be punished? And here I am setting such a bad example by preaching in jeans. I did wear a tie though! This is why I preach from the lectionary. See, I would be so tempted to substitute Luke’s version over Matthew’s. But no. I’m being a responsible preacher and working with the more difficult version. Mary will probably never sign up to be worship leader again, but at least I’m showing some homiletical integrity here. So what do we do with this

passage? In all honesty, the big takeaway lesson in Matthew's version is the same as in Luke's -- God's table is big and God's hospitality is even bigger. So why, then, is Matthew's version so violent?

I know I've told you all about the Jonesboro Storytelling Festival that's held every October in Jonesboro, Tennessee. This is not a comedy festival. The people on the stages are not standup comics. They are storytellers. Storytelling is older than written language. There is an art to storytelling. Communicating wisdom and truth is essential to a well-crafted story. Many people say that the Bible itself is a collection of the unfolding stories of God's people. Others are offended when folks refer to anything in the Bible as a "story." They'll say, "It's not a story! It's history! To call it a story implies that it's not true, and if it's not true then it's false and if it's false then you're calling God a liar, and if you call God a liar you can't truly say that Jesus is Lord and you'll end up in a bad place where there is much ... (weeping and gnashing of teeth.)" But I think much of history is told in story. And just because something is a story doesn't mean that it's not true.

At the Jonesboro festival, some of the storytellers tell traditional folk stories but with their own special twist. If a story has a foil or a villain who is notoriously cranky, a storyteller may simply say, "This guy is mean." Another might tell the same story in a different style and use an idiom like, "This guy is as mean as a striped snake." Another storyteller might provide specific examples of just how mean the villain is. Still another storyteller may want the audience to be truly shocked at how mean the villain is and will provide wild, over-the-top examples just in case people had any doubts. That's probably what's going on with the story we have in front of us this morning. Believe it or not, the story in Luke 12 is the parallel to the story in Matthew 22. That means Matthew and Luke were both drawing from the same well of oral tradition. The framework for the story is about an important person who invited the poor to come to his dinner because his rich friends blew him off. This is what both authors had in front of them when they wrote this down. It's just that Matthew wanted to make sure his readers knew some juicy

details just in case they didn't pick up on the notion that the dinner host was a harsh guy. Luke's dinner host was cranky. Matthew's dinner host was brutal.

The question *we're* probably interested in is whether Luke and Matthew were trying to convey that Jesus believed God was harsh. I don't believe so. Most of Jesus' parables are about what the coming of God's reign will be like. In other words, what does "thy kingdom come" mean and what will it look like? For Jesus' listeners, a banquet thrown by a wealthy person would be the pinnacle of social events that they would never be invited to. In Matthew's case, this isn't just any old banquet, this is a wedding banquet. And the wealthy man isn't just a successful businessperson from the merchant class, he's a king. And the guests he invites aren't merchants or landowners, these are vassals in a land where there's all sorts of Game of Thrones drama happening. This is a place where the king sends multiple servants out into the land to gather these ruling class guests. And the guests don't just dismiss the servants because they have other things to do, they murder the servants – "How dare you enter my land with such trivial business! I shall abuse you and murder you for your insolence. Bah! (Stab-stab-stab)." Then the king, of course, has to retaliate, so he burns their cities to the ground for *their* insolence! See how Matthew ramps this story up? Maybe it's because Luke's audience would have been sufficiently impressed that a cranky rich merchant would invite the poor to a banquet if his friends dissed him, but Matthew's audience might have thought, "Ho-hum. Big deal. Whatever." But a mad king who doesn't think twice about burning cities to the ground or banishing people who are underdressed to a place where there will be ... (Weeping and gnashing of teeth)? Now there's a story they could get into! See, this is why studying the Bible is so fun! You learn so much about the communities these gospels were written for. Especially when there are multiple examples.

An important feature of this parable, whether you're in the Luke community or the Matthew community, is to show that Jesus wants his listeners to envision what it would be like to have a place at the table of

the most important social event they could imagine. The people who, socially-speaking, have a right to be at the banquet but choose to reject the invitation. It doesn't matter if it's just that they have lame excuses or that they want to play Game of Thrones. The point is, they choose not to come. Jesus' listeners would think, "Why would they do that? Why would anyone turn down an invitation to such an important social event? It's downright rude and disrespectful for them to reject an invitation to such a great party! Are you so comfortable in your standing with the king that you'd just blow off his invitation? That's crazy!" Then Jesus tells his audience that the king does something that no other king would do. Something that flies in the face of all social norms. The king decides to welcome the unwelcomeable. Now ... this does say something about those who are too comfortable in their standing with the king. This says something about the ones who can't be bothered to go to a banquet when they've had advance notice. The good news of this story is meant for the poor and hungry ... the ones who would drop everything for an invitation to the banquet. When we lose sight of the radical grace of the invitation, we've forgotten who we are.

The banquet hall is crowded with the good and the bad. Our birthright as followers of Christ is to remember that none of us really "deserve" to be here, and so we should never impose our quality-control standards on anyone else the king wants to invite to the banquet. Our job is to go and tell, to invite all, and leave it to the host to thin the crowd if need be. Whether we believe that we deserve what we have or that we are somehow more worthy than another, we will find ourselves incapable of gratitude. The proper response to the king's invitation according to Jesus is to run to the banquet dressed for the marriage of heaven and earth, wondering how we ever got put on such a guest list.