

Come Sunday: A Narrative Lectionary-Based Bible Study

March 8, 2015- Third Sunday in Lent (Year One)

Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction

We get a card in the mail. It's on a very fancy paper written in script. The card is an invitation to a special event, like a wedding. There's another smaller card asking you to RSVP before a certain date.

Most of have been invited to attend a wedding. Sometimes we go, sometimes we don't. Weddings and other parties are a signs of hospitality and generosity on the side of the host. These days, we can ignore an invite and not suffer the consequences.

In today's parable, we are told the kingdom of heaven looks like a king who invites people to a party. The invitees ignore the invite and even end up killing some of the messengers. We have a king that then plunders a city as a result of the inhospitable nature of the invitees. This isn't a "nice" parable.

What is this story all about? What is God's kingdom really like? What does it mean to be welcomed into the party?

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The Setting

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is one of four parables Jesus tells on the topic of judgment. It begins in Matthew 21 with the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Tenants. Our reading for today is usually read as one story, but it is actually 2 stories: The Parable of the Marriage Feast (Matthew 22:1-10) and The Parable of the Wedding Clothing (Matthew 22:11-14).

You Are Cordially Invited...

² "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. ³ He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn't want to come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants and said to them, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Look, the meal is all prepared. I've butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything's ready. Come to the wedding party!" ' ⁵ But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. ⁶ The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them.

-Matthew 22:2-6

The common understanding of the wedding banquet is that it is an allegory of the messianic banquet, the Christians will enjoy with Christ in heaven. There are some Bible Scholars that discount this interpretation. Theologian Stanley Saunders sees danger in this traditional interpretation:

In despair of rational explanations for this parable's extreme images, most interpreters, all the way back to Chrysostom, have turned to allegory: the king represents God; the son is Jesus (although the son does not figure significantly in this story); the wedding feast is the messianic banquet; the rejected slaves are the prophets. The most pernicious allegorical turns typically identify those originally called to the banquet as Israel and the second round of invitees -- drawn from the streets -- as the (Gentile) church. In these readings, Matthew 22:1-7 depicts Israel's rejection of God and God's subsequent judgment against Israel, including the destruction of Jerusalem (the burnt city), while 22:8-10 announces the founding of the church, with 22:11-14 serving as a warning to Christians not to fail to wear the clothing of Christian virtues.¹

This allegorical reading of the parable, now usually identified as the “traditional” interpretation, is seductive because it ties up so many loose ends, rubs off the rough edges, and, most important, locates the church happily at the banquet. It also throws the door wide open to Christian triumphalism and anti-Semitism.

Does this traditional understanding veer into triumphalism?

In verse 2 we see the Greek word *kaleo* is used. *Kaleo* means “call” or “invite.” The king calls the people to the banquet; Christ calls us to mission and ministry.

Verse 3 notes that those invited didn’t respond. In that culture to not attend was to dishonor the host. Again, the king sends out another invitation, which was rejected again. This was now about the king’s loss of honor. Again the king sent messengers and this time those people were killed. This was a way to talk about how God’s prophets were killed by the elite. Verse 7 has the king attacking the city and killing those who refused to accept the invitation. Verse 8 has the king saying those invited were not worthy. A common understanding is that the unworthy were the Jews, or Israel and the invited are Jewish Christians. Could such an interpretation be anti-Semitic?

The new invitees are considered both bad and good. This could be talking about salvation; that it is Christ that welcomes us to the banquet and nothing we do can make us worthy.

The Dress Code

¹¹ Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn’t wearing wedding clothes. ¹² He said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ But he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to his servants, ‘Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.’

-Matthew 22:11-13

Sometimes we don’t have the right clothing to go to a party, but we are still welcomed to the wedding. So, why is a man punished for not wearing wedding clothes?

It seems a bit odd for God to enforce a dress code. Where would this person find wedding duds? Somehow everyone else is able to find wedding clothes.

One possible interpretation is that the wedding clothes are a reference to sanctification, the process of being made worthy by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions

1. Why do you think the first guests didn't want to come to the banquet? Why did they end up killing the messengers?
2. What do you think is the wedding clothing mentioned? Was it right for the king to punish the one without wedding garments?
3. In verse six, the word for abuse in Greek is *hubrizoo*, which is where we get the English word *hubris*. Do you think the guests acted with hubris?

¹Working Preacher, Narrative Lectionary. March 8, 2015.

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