

A Discerning Ear
Matthew 22:1-14; Exodus 32:1-14

You may have noticed that the past few months my messages have been from the book of Matthew. It is not that Matthew is more important than the rest of the bible or even the other gospels. It is just that Matthew is the featured gospel in the lectionary this year and I have been following the lectionary pretty regularly.

One of the great ways that Jesus teaches is through parables. We hear over and over in Matthew, "The kingdom of God is like..." Jesus compares the reign of God to yeast, a mustard seed, a farmer planting seeds, a fishing net, buried treasure, a priceless pearl, a vineyard and more. Today we hear that the reign of God is like a banquet.

But this banquet parable is rather disturbing – at least to me, with the anger and the violence. How are we, people who embrace peace, to hear this parable? How are we to understand it?

In one of my ministry classes we were to read and ponder this parable. What is going on here? Is this really how God works? Is God this vengeful?

I remember hoping someone would have a clear answer, yet not so simple that it would be unsatisfactory. While we had a great discussion, there was nothing conclusive. But then one classmate, from Virginia - who apparently wanted to become a radio preacher - began speaking about the "wrath of God." However, he just raged against the same old issues that "radio preachers" always seem to rage against. Well, since it was towards the end of the class and apparently he had more to offer, he announced that at our next class he would bring forward "three more reasons why those who have not yet heard the gospel... are deserving of God's wrath." This particular "soon to be preacher" had the easy answer, but it seemed rather self-congratulatory...

As a Brethren, I have to ask, what has happened to the Jesus of...“Blessed are the peacemakers?” Where is Jesus the healer? Jesus who reaches out and touches the unclean? Jesus who sits down to eat with tax collectors and sinners?

What can one do but go back to the beginning – of Matthew, and try to get a sense of just what the writer is trying to accomplish. Sometimes, even though we know how the story ends, it is hard to get a sense of the whole when we just read a few verses at a time on Sunday morning. What is Matthew trying to tell us about Jesus, about Jesus’ understanding of the reign of God?

To read through Matthew all at once is a different experience than reading in small sound bites. Reading Matthew from the beginning, one can more clearly see that Jesus does not always speak to the same audience. Sometimes Jesus preaches particularly to the gentiles, or those who are not Jewish. Sometimes he talks to the disciples. And sometimes he preaches directly to the religious leaders.

You would think that the religious leaders would appreciate that, their own private audience with a dynamic preacher. But the religious leaders are already wise theologians, they know how to live a faithful life, and they know what faithfulness looks like in others. For these religious leaders, there are clear commandments and teachings in the scriptures and Jesus isn’t following them the way he should.

Despite their criticisms, or maybe because of them, the religious leaders follow Jesus around...a lot. They ridicule Jesus, question and challenge him. He responds several times with these words, “Go and learn what the prophet Hosea means when he says, ‘I require mercy, not sacrifice.’” (Hosea 6:6; Matt 9:13) But they just don’t get it or won’t get it. Their ears, and their hearts, are closed to one who does not fit their concept of a faithful Jew.

Reading through the whole gospel of Matthew, we see that with this parable, Jesus is not talking to the disciples privately, he is not talking to the outcasts. Jesus is telling this current string of parables to the religious leaders – in the temple. You remember, they challenge him with a question about his authority. He will not tell them where he gets his authority. Instead he responds with several parables, right there in the temple, in the center of religious authority.

By this point in Matthew, Jesus has pretty much talked til he is “blue in the face” to get his message across to the religious leaders. He has lost all patience with them. He has invited them, more times than he can count, to encounter God with him. Instead of joining him, they plot against him.

So this time, instead of explaining the reign of God like a farmer who plants seeds indiscriminately, or a shepherd who looks for sheep, Jesus presents a king that invites people to the wedding banquet of his son...Who wouldn't be excited to receive that invitation? And yet the intended guests not only refuse the invitation, they kill the messenger who delivers the invitation.

Wow, harsh. Is that what you would do if you got invited to a wedding banquet? But it gets worse. The king retaliates, an eye for an eye, right?; kills the invited guests and burns down the town. Then the king attempts another round of invitations. This time anybody that happens to cross paths with the messengers is invited to the banquet and everyone comes. The place is packed.

What are we supposed to do with this? We people committed to peace? The response of the would-be guests is bad, but the king's response hardly seems like “turning the other cheek” (which is what we hear Jesus say earlier in “the sermon on the mount.”)

This parable is also included in the gospel of Luke (Luke 14:15-24) but Luke's version contains no violence on the part of the invited guests or the host. We hear the impolite rejection by the invited guests but no one gets killed, no homes are burned. The story ends with the open invitation to all those on the highways and byways to come to the party. This is a host who wants a full house.

But in Matthew, Jesus describes these violent responses. Plus the parable has a tacked on conclusion, a longer ending. It is another story of an angry king who is not pleased that a wedding guest is improperly prepared for the banquet; the guest is not wearing the appropriate wedding clothes. Unprepared for the feast, the person is bound and thrown into the dark, to the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It is helpful to remember that this is not the only picture of God we are given in the bible. The text we heard from Exodus is not unlike some other stories we have in the Hebrew bible where God gets angry and threatens to destroy the whole shebang and then is talked down by one of the patriarchs.

In Exodus, Moses convinces God that despite the people's bad attitude and the golden idol they built, the people should be given another chance. What would it look like if God led the people out of slavery and then just destroyed them in the desert? What kind of God does that? God hears Moses and spares the people.

Could the religious leaders possibly have these stories, from their own tradition, in their minds when they hear Jesus' parable? Do they think there will always be one more chance? That they can always reason with God?

Jesus must be extremely frustrated with his audience to use a parable like this as an illustration of the reign of God. It feels a bit like when a teacher gets really angry about a few kids in the class and she goes on a rant about how everyone better shape up or there will be consequences. The first time a child experiences this kind of anger from a beloved teacher, they often don't know what to do. It is scary, it is pointed, it is threatening.

Even the children who have been sitting quietly, following the rules, may feel that they are being yelled at. As adults sometimes we have to help kids interpret the situation, help them understand that the teacher had a bad day, that there are some children who are not listening, that there are a few kids who are acting out. Sometimes the "good kids" need to be told that the teacher's angry words are not meant specifically for them.

Is there any chance this could be what is happening here, in Jesus' parable? Jesus is directing this parable to the troublemakers, the disobedient kids, the chief priests and elders who have been challenging him for months? Perhaps 2000 years later, we who are followers of Jesus' way should wonder whether it is really meant for us? Maybe those who are not religious leaders don't need to pay attention to this one? What a relief. (for the rest of you.)

On the other hand, we dare not discard the difficult parables of Jesus too quickly. Just because we don't like the message doesn't mean we get to throw it out completely. That is what the religious leaders do and we are trying to avoid being like them, right?

So, is there anything in this difficult understanding of the reign of God for us? For those who have already said yes to Jesus? Perhaps we are not the important guests who get the first - embossed - invitation but the next level who just get an evite. Or maybe we are.

Maybe each day that we are alive we are invited - to enjoy the beauty of God's creation. Each day we are invited - to find community with other people made in God's own image. Each day we are invited - to slow down enough to prepare ourselves for the ways we will meet the Christ that walks among us. The banquet is here and we are invited.

May our eyes and ears and hearts be open to the beautiful table set before us. And may we say yes. Amen.

We praise you, O God, for being with us in this special time and place. Send us forth with courage to be witnesses of your work in the world. Let us not forget your name or power; let us not miss your glory in the mundane; let us not trample on holy ground, through Christ we pray. Amen.

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