## Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But 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. 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. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Here we are, a month or so away from Thanksgiving. Some of us are starting to make plans for the holiday, about where we will go, how long we will stay and with whom we will sit down to eat the traditional feast. Others who will host family gatherings are praying that the time together will be peaceful, that polarizing political views won't blow up the table as the turkey and cranberry sauce are passed. When we receive word that some of our loved ones won't be able to make it this year, we will wonder if the stated reason is the true one or if there isn't some kind of underlying animosity toward us or someone else who will be at the table. Others of us will feel the pain of having nowhere to go for the holidays, of pretending that that is just fine with us because we don't much like dressing or pumpkin pie anyway.

We understand the importance of family feasts, of festive gatherings of friends, of lavish wedding banquets, of their ability to reunite loved ones and build new memories that will be handed down to future generations. A lot of work and expense goes into such events; guests who have RSVP'd owe it to their hosts to show up if they said they would.

In Matthew, we read about a king who was throwing a wedding banquet more lavish than anyone in his parts had ever seen. He sent out “Save the Date” cards well in advance and counted all the RSVP's, making sure there would be enough fatted calf and well-aged wine for everyone. The problems started when the original guests, the ones who said they would be there, did not show up. Some said they had to work, others said their kids had play rehearsal or were sick and some didn't give any reason at all. What are we to make of the king's response that is so painful to read, of his retribution toward those who had tortured and killed his slaves and later of his rejection of the wedding guest who showed up in the wrong clothes?

David Lose helped me understand the cultural context in which Matthew placed his parable. Lose writes, “First, in this parable, as with the one we preached last week, we are catching a glimpse of the low point in an intense family feud. I want to emphasize the word “family” here because Matthew and his community are caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah and, in particular, whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah Israel’s prophets had promised. This is not a Jewish-Christian dispute – though in the centuries that follow Christians will use this passage to further their anti-Semitism (which is one of the things that makes this passage dangerous) – but rather represents the pain of a community sundered from its family and trying to justify itself.”

Matthew is speaking to communities in which families are struggling to stay together. Parents and children, aunts and uncles and cousins are finding it hard to get along. Some are steadfast in following the faith tradition of their ancestors, in supporting the priests and the temples where their faith is nourished. Others believe that the Jesus of whom they hear is the Messiah long promised by the prophets; they urge their loved ones to have their faith turned around and shaped by this reality. Imagine the tension and stony silences at their family get-togethers! It's easy for us to see the folly in those family feuds, for our faith is firmly seated in the identity of Jesus Christ as the holy one, the Messiah sent by God to fulfill all the prophets' promises. But in first century Palestine, the picture was not so clear and the reliance on faith to believe what seemed impossible split families and communities apart.

Matthew uses the analogy of a wedding banquet to portray the simmering tension. Again, from Lose: “On the whole, Matthew’s version [of this parable, which we also see in a much more palatable form in Luke] is darker, more violent, and pushes even the typical parable’s tolerance for absurdity to the edge. Why? Because at this point in the family conflict, [Matthew] is willing to say that God not only rejects those cousins and kin of his that rejected Jesus but actually sent the Romans to destroy the Temple as punishment (a conclusion not uncommon to Matthew, but intensified in this parable). This is painful stuff... and we’d best not ignore it. Why? Because this parable has been used across the centuries – and still by some Christians today – to drive a wedge between Jews and Christians and even to justify Christian mistreatment of Jews. Enough is enough.”

I don't think Matthew included this interpretation of Jesus' parable to separate Jews and Christians. I think he used it to portray the upheaval Jesus brought to the first-century church and to show the radical inclusion Jesus embodied through his earthly ministry, death and resurrection. I don't know how to explain the violence and rejection in Matthew's version of this parable. I can only surmise that it was influenced by the tensions of his day which then led to his deliberate attempt to berate those who rejected Jesus. The father who threw a wedding banquet for his son wanted a full banquet hall. Anyone who refused the invitation, who rejected the father God's son, Jesus, whom the father gave as a gift would be dealt with severely, Matthew suggested. If that were the end of the story, we would all be justified in going home and questioning everything we have ever been taught about Jesus. But it is not the end. The end and the beginning of the story is the son, the one for whom the wedding banquet is thrown, the groom who awaits his bride, the church.

In a subtle shift in this story, the father becomes the son and the son extends the banquet invitation far and wide, to good and bad, to the faithful and to those who question. The son embodies the expansive love and radical inclusiveness of his father. The gift of God's son is the ultimate invitation to grace and is more powerful than any words of condemnation or fear, even than any exclusionary words of Matthew. Nothing you or I can do can separate us from the love of Christ, but we better hear the full implications of this. When we find ourselves at the banquet table of our Lord, we are expected to accept that those to the left and to the right of us, those in front of and behind us, are just as welcome there as we are. Not only that, Jesus warns us not to get too cozy and sends us out to invite even more people to dine at his table. He warns us not to invite them because of their credentials, but to open the door to everyone, especially to those who have been told they do not deserve a seat at any banquet and should be content with the crumbs tossed their way.

This is a hard parable – hard to hear and hard to understand. Matthew is certainly influenced by his culture's judgment on those who did not think or believe the way he did. That part is not hard for us to understand, for we are just as adept at judging and excluding others as anyone in Matthew's day. But wrapping itself around all that disturbs us about this story is astounding love, the kind that calls us to welcome among us the ones who don't know what to wear here or say here or think here but who are starving for a meal of forgiveness and grace. Just the same as you and I.

Amen.

*Pentecost 19A*

*October 15, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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