

# 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn October 11, 2020

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

“Let us go now, to the banquet, to the feast of the universe. The table’s set and the feast is waiting, come everyone, with your gifts to share.”

(Guillermo Cuéllar, “Let Us Go Now to the Banquet.”) I warned you last week that we were getting into some difficult and challenging texts, and I confess to you that this week’s parable is challenging for me. Before I can even begin with thinking theologically about this text, it took me a while to wrap my head around the absurdity of the story being told.

A king invites guests to the wedding banquet for his son. But rather than attend such a wedding feast, the guests would rather work, go about their daily lives, or even kill the messengers with the invitation to the free feast. We say, “don’t kill the messenger,” usually thinking of a messenger who brings bad news. And somehow, the invitation to a royal wedding is construed as news bad enough to kill the messenger. And the king responds with violence in kind, specifically against those who murdered the messengers, but catching entire cities in the crossfire. “Let us go now to the banquet.” So then, after this public debacle, the king sends out servants to call anyone and everyone. To “gather them up” and bring them to the palace for the wedding feast. The way the text phrases it, these people are scooped up for a grand party, and then the king sees one of them in inappropriate attire. Many interpreters claim that it was common practice to

give an acceptable garment to guests of a royal wedding, as even wealthy and influential guests would rarely have something good enough. And while that has been debated, it's the only thing that can make sense of the world within the parable for me. If the king is not handing out acceptable wedding garments, I'm less surprised that there is someone inappropriately dressed than I am that there was *only* one person inappropriately dressed. The king responds with the type of violence we have seen from him before. And this is what the kingdom of heaven is like? Jesus explains this parable as "many are called but few are chosen." Which makes some sort of sense as a theological statement, a reminder that there will be people who reject the good news, but doesn't fit the numbers given in the parable, which are that  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the people called refused the invitation, and of the second  $\frac{1}{2}$ , all but one were able to stay. "Let us go now to the banquet." It's truly an absurd parable.

And we have done absurd things with it, using it to ignore much of the rest of scripture. Early allegorical readings of this parable understood the first guests to be the Jews who rejected Christ, so God rejects them in favor of the Gentiles. And while it was important for early Christians to explain why things were so different, and why Gentiles could have full participation, later Christians twisted that into the sort of anti-Semitism that resulted in centuries of persecution for Jews in Europe and eventually, the Holocaust. An Indian theologian points out theological documents from colonial India, where British theologians had argued that this shows God, the violent ruler. Therefore, violence from rulers against subjects who have slighted them is as beyond reproach as God. We try to remove the "absurd" from this parable by making it support our structures of power and authority. The

ruler has absolute right to restore “calm” that supports the ruler at the expense of listening to and being accountable to the subjects.

I think, brothers and sisters, that if this makes sense, we aren't reading it deeply enough. Matthew places this text immediately following last week's final vineyard parable, where the tenants have murdered the servants coming to collect the rent, and finally the son of the vineyard owner. And Matthew begins his gospel with a critique of a violent and vindictive ruler who is afraid of a challenge to his power. Herod embarks on a genocide of baby and toddler boys, reminiscent of Pharaoh's killing of the Hebrew baby boys in Exodus in an attempt to consolidate his power. Clearly, the larger story is not that rulers have unlimited authority to use violence any time they feel threatened.

It is also important to remember that this is a parable, a fictitious story told to make a theological point. So what is the point? I think we need to hear the importance of the invitation. This is not something to be taken lightly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lamented what he called “Cheap Grace” that he saw infecting the Lutheran churches around him. And we balk at that term, “cheap grace,” thinking that he is advocating for a sort of works righteousness. But he isn't. He is arguing that when we make light of grace, we are cheapening the cost that Christ paid for it. When we make light of salvation, when we say that salvation is only about our final death, we say that grace has no power here, that it is cheap enough that I can pay for it on my own. It's about the costliness of joining the celebration, of accepting that we are here, not on our merits but by the grace of God. The costliness of accepting the others at the table with us. The costliness of

God not leaving us alone, as we are, but God transforming us. The first teaching Jesus gives in this gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, opening with the Beatitudes. The life of faith is not a cheap knickknack that we display and forget. It's transformative, turning our lives upside down. And yet, we celebrate together, "let us go now to the banquet." To God's banquet, where we are made new. Where all things are made new to God's glory.