

Invitations  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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Matthew 22: 1 – 14

*1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again 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.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

*11“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then 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.’ 14For many are called, but few are chosen.”*

A few weeks ago, I quoted the actress Dolly Parton from the movie Steel Magnolias.

This parable for this week had me thinking about that movie again. A movie that starts with a wedding. A really big southern wedding. The morning of the wedding the women are all getting their hair done. The bride, Shelby, chooses that moment to tell her mother that, the night before, she decided to call the wedding off. She tells this to her mother before telling her mother that after that decision she and her fiancé talked and are in fact going to get married. As her mother and their friends breathe a deep sigh of relief, one of them says,

“Shelby, you scared us. That wasn't a nice thing to do to your mama. You should never say something like that to a woman who's marinating fifty pounds of crab claws.”<sup>1</sup>

A big wedding is nothing to trifle with.

The man king in the parable from Matthew, the third in a series of three parables, is hosting a wedding for his son. The guests have been invited—not for a particular day or time, but to get ready. They will be told when the party is starting. But when the servants are sent to call those who have been invited, they do not come.

We do not know why, only that it is their choice. There is no excuse. Nothing has suddenly come up. They are, to offer a more literal translation, not willing to come. It is, more than one commentator has suggested, a protest. A rebellion. They are defying the king.

The king re-doubles his efforts and sends the servants back out to tell the people that it is time. This time he includes what's on the menu. Prime Rib. Crab Cakes. Oysters. Crème Brulee. This is going to be a feast. And at the end, another expression of invitation. Only this time it is not a “y'all come” that the servants share. It is a “you better be before I count to three” command.

It does not change their minds. One goes to his fields and another to his work. They do not heed the king. The verb here is only used once in the gospels, but reinforces what has already happened. They choose to not attend.

The king is done. Finished. If the people whom he has invited will not accept his hospitality, (though calling it hospitality might be a stretch, the man king is more hostile than hospitable) then he is done with them. Troops are sent out with a scorched earth policy. Those who defy him will be wiped from the earth.

The man king now decides that those who had been invited were, retroactively, unworthy of the invitation.

But the king will have his full wedding banquet. This is not about 50 pounds of marinating crab claws that might go to waste, this is about pride and the fulfilment of the man king's



vision. The slaves are told to continue on their journey and bring whomever they find into the banquet.

Which the servants do, bringing everyone, the good and the bad into the hall.

But when the man king comes in to see the guests. (Not to celebrate, but to inspect them) he finds one who is not wearing the appropriate clothing. The offender is bound and thrown into the outer darkness.

The story, the parable, ends with the gospel's author or a later editor trying to wrap up all of the loose ends with the moral, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Friends, does this sound like the kingdom of God to you?

I propose that it does not.

In fact, most commentators I consulted to prepare this sermon don't think so, either. They have tied themselves in knots, faithfully wrestled with the text, sought grace, talked about the truth of how the life of discipleship transforms us. About why the king here can be compared to God.<sup>2</sup>

But I don't believe that's the story that is being told here.

And I'm not alone. Some of the scholars who have studied this text, particularly D. Mark Davis, a Presbyterian pastor in California whose translation I am relying heavily on today, have noticed a few things I want you to notice, too.<sup>3</sup>

One is the context. What comes just before this parable is another parable where rebellious subjects are acting out, and Jesus asks those who have gathered what the response should be. They tell Jesus that revenge is the way of justice.

Is it possible he is, now, sharing a parable that shows them what it would be like for God to model their proposal, in the hopes that they will see the absurdity of what they suggest—a way that seeks right over compassion?

There is also a phrase at the beginning of this parable that is worthy of a closer look. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to." "May be compared to" is the way the translators

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<sup>2</sup> Several very solid commentaries can be read here:

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3443](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3443)

<sup>3</sup> I cannot underestimate how much I have relied on this translation for today's sermon:

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-kingdom-of-heavens-v-kingdom-of.html>

have rendered a passive verb, noticeable because it is different from what Jesus has said before.

Instead of “The Kingdom of God is like,” here Jesus says, more literally, “The kingdom of God has been compared to”

Can we really take so much from one verb translated from two different tenses?

Based on that and the fact that similar stories with very different implications exist in the Gospel of Luke and the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, I think that we can.

And not only can we. We must. We must pay such close attention, because just this very week, this very week, there was a story made public of a little girl in Indiana who has been told by her church that she cannot take first communion unless she wears a dress.<sup>4</sup>

How did this come up? Apparently, the little girl in question spoke about the outfit she had picked out for this very special occasion. A white crushed-velvet pantsuit. The leaders of the school got word of her choice and made an official dress code policy requiring girls to wear dresses or they could not take their first communion with the rest of their class.

And that breaks my heart.

I believe it breaks God’s heart, too.

A child of God being told that she isn’t good enough because of what she chooses to wear. Who she is.

How is that faithful? How is that Biblical?

And what I think Jesus really wants us to say when we hear this parable is, “No way! The kingdom of God is not like that! We get it, Jesus, we get it”

Our God is a God who invites. Who welcomes. Who cares. Who comforts. Not just some, but all.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/indiana-church-denies-first-communion-little-girl-who-wore-suit-n810496>

Nina Simone famously sang, "You've got to learn to leave the table when love's no longer being served."<sup>5</sup>

Today I am reminded that our God never stops serving love at the table.

From the moments of creation to the time of the prophets. To the birth of the savior and the morning when the tomb was empty, the message of love is strong and sure. God does not stop searching for us, inviting us. Not commanding, but welcoming.

Pointing out that the road of hurt and exclusion leads us to a place we do not want to live, and pointing to a better way. A table where love is always being served. A table where there is always enough to set another place.

A table where, if someone is shamed or excluded for not having the right clothes, or for being different, nobody else at the table will sit idly by while his hands and feet are bound, but instead will all proclaim, "if you're throwing him out, we're all going with him. We go where Jesus goes."

Maybe we should say that the Kingdom of God is like, is like, a man by the name of Julio Diaz.<sup>6</sup>

A social worker in New York who "ends his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he can eat at his favorite diner.

But one night..., as Diaz exited his train and went down the stairs he was greeted by a teenager with a knife. The teenager wanted his money, so Diaz gave him his wallet.

But then, as the teenager walked away, Diaz thought of something, and he called after the teenager. "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

"He asked me, 'Why are you doing this?'"

Diaz, as he handed over his coat said, "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean,

"You have to learn how to get up from the table when love is no longer being served."

Nina Simone



<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right>

all I wanted to do was get dinner and if you really want to join me ... hey, you're more than welcome.

The teenager accepted. So they went to the diner. They sat. Diaz was a regular here. "The manager comes by, the dishwashers come by, the waiters come by to say hi," Diaz says. "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?'"

"No, I just eat here a lot," Diaz says he told the teen. "He says, 'But you're even nice to the dishwasher.'"

Diaz replied, "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?"

"Yea, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the teen said.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for this. So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

And the teenager gave Diaz back his wallet. Diaz paid the bill, gave the teen \$20, and then asked if he would give Diaz his knife. Which the teen did. And they went their separate ways, both of them changed by the encounter.

Jesus, today, through Matthew, tells us a story of what the kingdom of God is not like, and in the negative allows us to imagine what it IS truly like. And given what I know about God, I think it's like that. I think it's like that.