

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 10/9/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 22:1-14

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew is a text that tends to make preachers cringe when it comes around in the lectionary cycle. The story that is attributed to Jesus here simply doesn't sound to me like something he would say. In fact, the Gospel of Luke has a much nicer version of this parable, as does the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. I'd rather that we look together at one of those.

But, we're in year A of our three-year lectionary cycle, and year A is Matthew's year, so, like it or not, his version of this story is what we're presented with. What sense can we make of Matthew's take on this parable about an invitation to a wedding feast?

Parts of the story are fairly clear. Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders of Israel, during the last days of his life, in Jerusalem, about what the reign of God looks like. God – the king in this story – is throwing a lavish wedding banquet for his beloved son. God's extravagant provision for God's people is symbolized by the description of the feast that's been prepared. But, when the guests who were invited won't come, the king sends servants into the streets to invite those who will. The implication is that a special relationship with God, previously available only to a select group of people, is now something that God is offering to all.

I wish that the parable was that simple. But there are all kinds of confusing and difficult details that complicate it. Some of those who are first invited don't just refuse to come – they kill the servants who issue the invitations in the king's name. The king, enraged, retaliates by sending an army to burn down the city in which the offenders live. As Barbara Brown Taylor has wryly commented, "By the time all that had happened, the veal roast would be seriously overdone." And then there's the guest who does respond to the invitation to the banquet, but, because he's not dressed properly, is banished – not just tossed unceremoniously into the street, but bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness. What is that about?

Understanding the context in which Matthew was writing helps us begin to make sense of some of these disturbing details. Matthew lived under the tyranny of the Roman Empire, where minimal provocation could result in arrest, torture, and death. What seems like gratuitous violence to us, in the telling of this story, might reflect a bit of what people lived with.

Matthew was deeply concerned with Israel's salvation history and Jesus' part in it. His version of this parable seems to echo Israel's refusal to heed the warnings of many of God's prophets over the centuries, and the murder of some of those who were sent to speak the word of God to God's people. Matthew may have wanted to relate what he experienced in his own lifetime to the stories of his faith tradition.

Matthew wrote after the devastating destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple in 70 C.E. – an event that some in the early church interpreted as an act of God’s judgment. That might help explain the harsh, judgmental tone that pervades this story.

The early church was moving from a Jewish to a Gentile constituency. The faith community was struggling with the question of whether to accept all who wanted to be part of it, or whether to insist on some standards for membership and behavior. So who was included and why was a hot topic for Matthew and his community.

And then there’s that wedding garment. Some scholars believe that at a royal wedding feast in Matthew’s day, the provision of such a garment was, actually, the host’s responsibility. In that case, the emphasis in the story would be on the guest’s refusal to wear the clothing that was provided, rather than the guest deliberately not showing up in clothing appropriate for a special occasion. After all, how could someone who had never been invited to a black tie event in his life be expected to hang around in a tux, just in case such an opportunity might possibly arise?

Matthew’s version of this parable of Jesus has some details that disturb us, others that confuse us, and an agenda that was specific to his own time and place. Because of all of that, our tendency might be to simply dismiss it as irrelevant for us. Yet, even with all of Matthew’s baggage, we can engage this portion of Scripture - our sacred text – because it is still alive for us. What might we understand about God and about ourselves from this story? What about it might we actually be able to relate to, and even embrace?

How about this: God has invited us, and all people, to the ultimate banquet – living in relationship with God. God, as the gracious host, wishes to clothe each invited guest with an exquisite garment suitable for the occasion – God’s own spirit, filling us. If we, God’s guests, are willing to partake of the banquet, and to wear the garment offered us, our lives will begin to be transformed to resemble that of God’s son, in whose honor the banquet is given.

This is a choice that we get to make – whether or not to be a guest at this extraordinary banquet to which we’ve been invited. There’s nothing that we’ve done to earn a place at the table – it’s been offered to us purely out of love. Why in the world would we ever refuse, either to show up at the feast, or to put on the offered garment?

For one thing, there are plenty of other parties to which we’re invited. We’re very busy people, with many important things on our calendars. God won’t force us to go to this particular party – it’s our choice.

As well, if we accept the invitation to feast at God’s table and receive the wedding robe that’s given to us there, we’ll be changed. God will be in us, and we will be in God in a way that makes us more and more the person that God has created us to be. We will be empowered by God’s spirit to do God’s work. Who God intends us to be might not fit perfectly with the plans that we’ve carefully laid for ourselves. The gifts that God

intends to develop in us, and the ministries that God has prepared for us, might astonish us. The possibilities are endless. That can be downright terrifying.

We've been invited to the ultimate banquet. God, our gracious host, desires to clothe us with a garment suitable for the occasion, which will utterly transform us. Will we accept God's invitation? Will we put on the garment? The choice is ours. Amen.