



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20A (Proper 23)

[RCL] Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

What If?

It's possible that the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" referred to at the end of this parable is being performed by anybody who has to preach on this Gospel passage this morning. The kingdom of heaven is like ... a king with anger issues, a vicious aristocracy, and a guest with poor taste in clothing who gets thrown into everlasting torment? How is this good news?

Where's the Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28)? The one who gave us the Beatitudes; the one who heals all the sick; the one who says, "Let the children come to me" (Matthew 19:14)?

Believe it or not, this *is* the same Jesus who is speaking to us this morning, but this time, the verbal form he's using can be trickier to understand. Unlike a wise proverb or a beautiful promise, parables are stories that are *meant* to be weird. They are undomesticated by design. They have no clear answers tied up in a bow. Instead, they have outrageous characters doing ridiculous things, all for the purpose of expanding our holy imaginations.

And yes, of course, we first use intellect, study, and analysis to understand the foundational context of the parables—that of the original culture and language—and all the implications thereof. But then, springing from that foundation, parables invite us to feast on "what if?" And in that "what if," we can explore new ways of living and loving outside the stifling, normative box created by our own cultural assumptions, conventions, and any self-righteous sense of moral certainty. Author and New Testament theologian Amy Jill Levine, in her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, offers this key to our exploration of multi-faceted truth in parables:

Like a poem (another simile), a parable will evoke numerous interpretations; it is our job to sort through them.

When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables and, so, ourselves.

We might be better off thinking less about what they “mean” and more about what they can “do”: remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb.

And *disturb* is exactly what this parable does. Here we find a dismissive and murderous aristocracy that kills royal servants for the crime of inviting them to a dinner. Here’s a king who has apparently never heard of de-escalation, so he destroys a city. Here’s a royal social order so rigid that commoners are coerced to come and party while unburied corpses—and what little possessions they may have had—are still burning in the city’s rubble. And we can’t forget the guy without a tux who gets tortured for all eternity. Not to mention all the elegant foods prepared for the gourmet feast—the fatted calf and slaughtered oxen waiting to be consumed like some time-sensitive parmesan and truffle double-baked soufflé—across the time it took for a monarch to assemble troops and commit war crimes against his own people!

Why would Jesus offer any part of this absurd nightmare as an example of the kingdom of heaven?

Let’s start at the foundation.

The foundation for this parable derives, at least in part, from an argument unfolding after the time when Jesus lived and taught. At the time when Matthew’s Gospel was being written, there was an intramural cultural and theological argument between two sides of the Jewish community: about whether Jewish Christians or Jewish non-Christians were the ones truly following God.

By having the parable’s king destroy the city of those who “would not come” to the wedding banquet he had prepared, Matthew is weighing in on the debate. The destroyed city in the parable recalls the Roman decimation of the city of Jerusalem—and the absolute razing and defiling of temple—in 70 AD. The application seems to be that, in the destruction of Jerusalem, God’s judgement has been enacted on the Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus. The parable could be Matthew’s way of arguing that Jewish believers in Jesus are the ones truly faithful to God.

Now this historical context doesn’t necessarily mean that we should read this parable as a wholesale allegory, but that’s most often how this parable is explained in pulpits, Sunday School, and Bible studies. And unfortunately, from that interpretation, it’s just a hop, skip, and a jump to many false and anti-Semitic notions: about how Christians and Jews fit into the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation.

What if, for us here and now, Jesus is also doing a new thing? The great thing—the good news—about Christ’s invitation to the “What if?” of parables is that—once we honor the foundation—we’re set free to listen to whatever else the Holy Spirit has to say. Is this parable about existence of judgment? The fact of Jesus’s rejection? The inclusion of others who are often rejected, now being fed and honored at God’s table?

What if this parable is a mirror held up for us to see our sometimes-distorted notions of God and God’s kingdom—or shall we say God’s “commonwealth”? (Remember: parables invite us to think about God in fresh and vivid terms, asking, “What if...?”) What if God operates outside of our notions of power and control, of scarcity and fear? What if God rejects being depicted as angry or power hungry, rejects being used as an excuse for the crusades or the slave trade or the Doctrine of Discovery? What if Jesus isn’t the bridegroom as depicted in this story—a royal so inconsequential to the lives of his subjects (and to our

daily lives now), that he's ornamental rather than functional? What if Jesus isn't a prince so negligible that we can offer worship on Sunday and then uphold empire on Monday?

If this parable can function as a mirror, the reflections we see in it are not for the purpose of beating up on the church, using shame as a punishment for judgment. What if judgment isn't exclusively about punishment, but about clear sight and honest repentance, leading to love and liberation?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said it best: "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

What if the ridiculous cruelty of this parable is meant to remind us of the simple fact that God is love, and we are beloved? Jesuit priest and author Gregory Boyle addresses this beautifully in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*:

God, I guess, is more expansive than every image we think rhymes with God ... The God, who is greater than God, has only one thing on her mind, and that is to drop, endlessly, rose petals on our heads. Behold, the one who can't take his eyes off of you. Marinate in the vastness of that.

Following love's logic to its conclusion, let us look again at the parable's mirror.

Perhaps Jesus isn't king or son, but a conscientious objector to empire. Jesus is the one who won't go along with status-quo maintenance and the terror that comes with abuse of power.

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz Weber describes Jesus in the parable like this: "At Calvary he (is cast out into) the outer darkness of empire, the outer darkness of our self-obsessions, the outer darkness of our secret addictions, the outer darkness of our sins and sorrows, the outer darkness of our human competition extravaganza. He goes to Calvary, rather than play along."

What if we, like Jesus, refuse to "play along" with empire, and with our projections on and emulation of God as tyrant?

What if—among the many who are invited—the few chosen are the ones who choose to follow Divine Love incarnate, so that we can *all*—every human being everywhere—may be called "beloved," God's children with whom God is well pleased?

What if, because of what was done by Jesus in the outer darkness of Calvary, we really do get to, as Father Boyle says, "marinate in the vastness of a God who can't take their eyes off of you, and who endlessly drops rose petals on our heads"?

Amen.

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