

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, October 15, 2023 // Proper 23, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to the people 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."

Background and general observations

The parable in this passage continues the theme of judgment that we see in the parable that immediately precedes it, the parable of the landowner and the wicked tenants. Once again, we see a persistent protagonist, sending one messenger after another, but those to whom the messengers are sent respond inappropriately. The result is terrible judgment.

This story of the king who gave a wedding banquet is disturbing to many. It is disturbing that the king's invitation to the wedding banquet was refused or ignored by everyone who initially received the invitation; they were too busy with other matters and so made light of the king's invitation. But the story is especially disturbing at the end, when the king notices a man who was invited off the street who was not wearing the right clothes. The king's treatment of this man might seem extreme, to say the least.

The idea that "many are called, but few are chosen" could indicate to some that Jesus is describing a capricious and even unfair God. At the very least, this parable makes it clear that it is not just the unresponsive Jews who are liable to God's judgment; those who were invited late and who joined the banquet (Gentiles and Jews in the church) are also subject to judgment. But as some of the ideas below suggest, the lesson here may be more complex; not wearing a proper wedding robe could be symbolic of something much deeper than mere clothing.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. When have you either ignored or made light of an invitation from God?

Sometimes a mailed invitation gets lost in a magazine or catalogue and accidentally gets tossed out, so that we never see it. Or maybe you receive an email but for some reason never open it. Or hear the phone ringing, but don't answer. As you ponder your life, how might God be issuing invitations to you that you accidentally (or in your haste or your busyness or your preoccupation with other things) push aside and never notice?

What changes in your life might help you to notice and respond appropriately to an invitation from God? How can you be sure you are not missing God's call to you?

2. "For many are called, but few are chosen."

It has been said that Grace (God's unmerited gift) is free but not cheap. What do you know from your life about a gift (one you gave or one you received) that was free but not cheap?

If God's call is itself a gift, how can you faithfully "choose" it? How can you best position yourself not only to receive God's invitation but also to open and answer it? What might be the cost of living this way?

3. In thinking through this passage, it might be helpful to remember that, in the Bible—and in much of literature—clothing is often used as symbolism, used to make a point metaphorically. Paul writes (Col 3:12 ff) that we should clothe ourselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." He goes on to say that, above all, we should clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything in perfect harmony. Paul also says that we put on Christ's righteousness like a garment when we are baptized. So, in the Bible, clothing can symbolize conversion and the attitudes and behavior that are found in the heart of the believer. With this in mind, ask yourself a few questions about how you come clothed to the feast of your life:

How are you "clothed" for your various relationships and activities? For example, how are you clothed when you come home from work and greet your family? How are you clothed when you go to church? How are you clothed when you go to the grocery store, expecting to see no one you know? How are you clothed when you sit down to eat with your family or friends? How are you clothed when you are alone, or silent in prayer?

Are we sometimes clothed with preoccupation and over-active minds? Do we sometimes show up for our lives and relationships wearing garments of frustration or resentment or irritation or envy?

What might it mean, and how would your life change, if you were more thoughtful and intentional about being clothed in love, kindness, humility, openness, patience, and compassion?

4. Keeping in mind the last set of questions, consider the following as an interpretive lens through which we might view this parable: When we show up for our relationships and the feast of our lives in inappropriate clothing, we don't need to fear a geographical or spatial outer darkness

with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Instead, we should fear the outer darkness of brokenness, isolation from people we love, loss of faith and hope...these are hell; these are what bring on the deepest darkness, with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

How do you respond to the king's severity when you place this lens over the parable? Is it helpful for you to imagine yourself as the exiled guest? Are you aware of a time in your life when you have shown up wearing, metaphorically speaking, the wrong clothing?

5. Consider this idea: there is a party going on. It's called the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is at hand right now, all the time. But you are not going to be able to participate in this feast or party unless you are properly clothed. So, put on compassion; clothe yourself with kindness; take off the shoes of anger or frustration, and put on humility instead. Above all, clothe yourself in love.

Sounds good, maybe. But what is getting in the way of being so properly clothed? What keeps you from showing up without a wedding robe?

6. From the Bible Workbench:

...the invited guests are too busy with some type of work to take part in the feast. How often this has been a story in my life. The adage "work before play" is a prerogative and a mantra for me and I realize that, in many ways, I've become a human doing instead of a human being.

It's true! There is always important work to be accomplished. Someone has to do it and, seeing as how I generally know the "best" way, I may as well be the one. I've missed plenty of parties, either because of tasks (real and imagined) or because I was pooped from the completion of those tasks. I've also sometimes missed the big banquet, the banquet of life—the opportunity to connect with other humans in their simple "beingness."

And now I wonder: How often during a phone conversation have I missed the subtle sadness in a friend's voice, as I simultaneously unloaded the dishwasher and checked my email? How often have I dismissed my child's need for a hug as, head down, I marched to the laundry room with a basket overflowing with resentments? How often have I yelled at the dog to "for God's sake shut up," instead of joining the festival taking place in the yard?

7. "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."

It sounds as if Jesus expects unbelievers to be in our midst because, at this feast, all are gathered, no questions asked. Does this say anything to you about whom we are to welcome to the wedding feast? Does this suggest to you something about the way we are to treat one another?



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