

Matthew 22:1-14 ~ Philippians 4:4-9
Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: "Yes" means "Yes" (5th of 6)
 20th Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 15, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel Reading

Are you ready for round three in Jesus' one, two, three power-packed parables delivered in the temple in Jerusalem? It's been a long week in our world since last Sunday, so I will remind you of where we are in Matthew's biblical narrative. It's still Monday of Jesus' last week on earth. We are still in the Temple, and the religious authorities are still trying to find a way to arrest Jesus, despite his growing popularity with the crowds who regard him as a prophet and a truth teller. Jesus has one more parable of judgment for the chief priests and pharisees. Again, it's about a father and a son. But this one is not in a vineyard. This week it's about a wedding banquet that a king is throwing for his son. Sounds like fun, right?

Don't settle in with your popcorn for a rom-com or for a sweet "happily ever after" love story *too* quickly. The absence of a bride might be your first clue that something is off. But that's not all. In fact, this wedding banquet goes wrong in so many ways, I invite you to count them. Troops get deployed, people are killed, a whole city gets burned before the feast even gets started. With the acrid smoke of charred buildings and lives, the feast finally begins. But we're still not out of the woods: it ends with an innocent guest who did say "yes" to the king's invitation gets shamed, mocked, and banished into the outer darkness for no good reason. If this was a movie, you would find it on your Netflix, Prime Video, or Hulu cues under Horror Movies, to be sure.

Nevertheless, this is a parable about Jesus and discipleship. It's a parable about saying "no" and saying "yes." And together we will find there is Good News in it about God's dream of peace. Even in the shadow of political extremism, unspeakable violence, and whatever unbearable weight you may be experiencing in your chest at this moment. May you listen for and detect the abiding sonar of hope, the ultimate "yes" from Christ, which holds us together and guides us. No matter how deep we descend into the valley of the shadow of death.

Sermon

You are likely more familiar with Luke's version of this story (Luke 14:16-24). Perhaps thanks, in part to this unforgettable camp song, "I cannot come." Hit it, Dan! *I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments, that cost a pretty sum, Pray hold me excused, I cannot come.* Dan Crump then added his own original hot off the press version:

I cannot come.

Maybe I can zoom to the banquet, you can send me the link

I have to scrub the bathtub, I have to clean the sink.

I have to buy the groceries, I have to call my mom.

Pray hold me excused, I cannot come.

This song (the original refrain and Dan's 2023 update) is based on the favorite version of the story for most of us. Definitely the one we preachers would rather preach from. In Luke's telling nobody gets killed for issuing an invitation. Nor do steaming sides of beef and oxen grow cold while the enraged king sends out troops to destroy the entire city because of their violent refusal to attend his banquet. And in Luke's telling at least those who said "no" had relatively good excuses for not attending. In Matthew's version, no one even bothers with an excuse for refusing to come. Nor does Luke's version include the kicker at the end when the mysterious guest gets condemned and thrown into the outer darkness for what? Just for his understandably inappropriate attire given the last-minute nature of his invitation.

Surely Matthew's version of this parable is unrealistic and unbelievable. And it is ripe for misinterpretation. Debie Thomas, an Episcopal priest, theologian, and author opened up a whole new way of seeing this parable for me that I am eager to share with you. She writes: "For centuries, we Christians have attempted to soften and sanitize this brutal story. Most often, we've done so by flattening the parable into allegory. In the interpretation most of us learned as children, the king in the parable is God, the son/bridegroom is Jesus, the wedding feast is the Messianic banquet, the rejected and/or murdered slaves are the Old Testament prophets, and the A-list guests who refuse to attend the wedding are God's "chosen people," the Israelites. And the B-listers? Those last-minute guests who come in off the streets to fill the banquet hall instead? Those folks are us. The gentiles."ⁱ

Does that sound like the interpretation you grew up with? I did. As she goes on to point out, "the interpretation was so airtight, it prevented me from accessing the actual parable at all. I glossed right over the extremity of its violence and the cartoonish quality of its plot. I reveled in its implicit judgment of "those other people" who stupidly reject the king's invitation, and automatically placed myself in the category of those who flock to the wedding feast — fancy garb at the ready... Think about it. *Once again*, in this traditional interpretation of the story, the Jewish people get everything wrong, lose their coveted place on God's A list, and take a backseat to the more faithful and more deserving (gentile) church. What a dangerous and wounding angle on the story — an angle that participates in the long, bloody history of the church's abusive relationship with the Jewish people from whom we come." And of whom Jesus was.

But here's one of the major problems with this traditional interpretation: "If you see God as the king in this parable, then we have to ask, do we really believe in a God as petty, vengeful, hotheaded, and thin-skinned as the king in this parable? A god who would burn an entire city to the ground to appease his wounded ego. A god who forces people to celebrate his son's marriage while his armies wreak destruction right outside. A god who casts an impoverished guest into the outer darkness for reasons the guest absolutely can't control?"

"Obviously, the answer is no. *Of course*, we don't believe in a God as monstrous as that. Do we? ...A king who invites a homeless guy into his palace and then banishes him for lacking formalwear. Honestly, why do we try to make this version of the story OK when it isn't

OK?" Here is Debie's starburst of a turn, where she pushed against the traditional reading and opens a new path to understanding what Jesus would have us hear and see in this story. She writes, "What if the king in the parable *isn't God at all*? What if the king is what we project onto God? What if the king embodies everything we've learned to associate with divine power and authority from watching other, all-too-human kings and rulers?"

Kings like Herod. Conquerors like the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, who in 70 CE destroyed much of Jerusalem and the Second Temple. [Matthew's mention of the burned city likely alludes to this historical event.] And leaders throughout history up to and including in our own time and place, leaders who exercise their authority in abusive, violent ways, compelling their followers to gleefully celebrate in circumstances that call for lament."

Instead, "What if the "God" figure in the parable is the one guest who refuses to accept the terms of the tyrannical king? The one guest who says "no" to wearing the robe of forced celebration and coerced hilarity, the one guest whose silent resistance brings the whole sham feast to a thundering halt?" Sounds a lot like Jesus to me. "This man is the one brave guest who decides he'd rather be "bound hand and foot," and cast into the outer darkness of Gethsemane, Calvary, the cross, and the grave, than accept the authority of a violent, loveless sovereign."

Where does this interpretation place us? And what is Jesus calling us to do? I hear Jesus summoning us into God's dream, by painting a caricature of its opposite. What God's dream is not. The glimpse of heaven on earth that Jesus is trying to show us, is a dream that requires us to say "no" to the robes of privilege, power, wealth, and empire. A dream that calls us to recognize our complicity in the systemic evils of our time. And to push back together, in any way we can.

Bringing this in closer to home: that's what our Matthew 25 bold vision calls us to do here at FPC. As we work to "dismantle structural racism" and "eradicate systemic poverty." This parable teaches us that to say "yes" to God's dream calls us to choose to follow the unrobed dissenter when he is escorted into the darkness, bound, and broken for the sake of love. To say "yes" to God's dream calls us "to choose affliction over apathy, even when it costs us a spot in the palace." Even as early as the late first century when the anonymous author of Matthew wrote his gospel, we can hear his distress about the mixed state of the church, the threat of complacency already lurking. A discipleship in which we only speak "Lord, Lord" but do not really step into a whole change of attitude and behaviors.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021) led the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that endeavored to mend the breach caused by the egregious human rights violations during apartheid. Living in the midst of that scourge of systemic evil, he envisioned God's dream for the world like this:

Dear Child of God, before we can become God's partners, we must know what God wants for us. "I have a dream," God says. "Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and

caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.

In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian—all belong.... Jesus came into a deeply divided and polarized society... The world saw a veritable miracle unfolding before its very eyes as all sorts and conditions of women and men, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile—all these came to belong in one fellowship, one communion. They did not regard one another just as equals. That in itself would have been a huge miracle.... No, they regarded one another not just as equals but as sisters and brothers, members of one family, God's family.ⁱⁱ

What will your answer be? For you, for me, for us? Let's think about how to live into our answer. The stakes are high. As Wallace Stevens once wrote, "After the final no there comes a yes, and on that yes the future world depends."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ This is the first of several quotes all excerpted from Debie Thomas' piece, posted October 4, 2020: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2777-the-god-who-isn-t>

ⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2005), 19–22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wallace Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," frontispiece to Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Unsheltered*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2018).