

March 24, 2019
If Grace, Once Tasted, Isn't What We Want
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Matthew 22:1-14

22 Once 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. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ 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.’ ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰ 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.

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

The parables in which Jesus sends people to hell aren't my favorite. Nor when he says, *Many are called, few are chosen!*

Things around here are bad enough, I shout at no one in particular, when I'm supposed to be studying. Jesus himself sounds different now, here in the third week of Lent, Year One in the Narrative Lectionary. (Jesus didn't choose the year, we assigned him.)

He sounds different because he's talking to a different set of folks. He's in Jerusalem now. Instead of disciples, he's speaking to spies – *spies who are taking notes*. But not for an exam; for evidence, building a case against this Galilean rabbi they suspect of inciting peasants to rebellion against Rome.

They are defenders of their faith, they believe. Even though his crowds have changed, Jesus's format hasn't. Still parables, same theme: the overwhelming, never-ending, precious grace of God. But grace sounds different preached in hostile places which,

interestingly, are religious spaces. Grace is now stripped down to subtext and cloaked in judgment.

Let's pray: *Learning to receive your grace as is, O God; to let ourselves be welcomed as we are – the good, the bad, the weird, the embarrassing, the broken; to accept your grace as it is, O God – absolutely just: this is the challenge of our faith, our prayers, and our life together. Amen.*

I went to seminary in the late 1980's and early 1990's, to a seminary when and where – I kid you not! – there were spies in my theology classes. Russians? Nooooooooooooo. The NSA? Nooooooooooooo. The fundamentalist contingent of the Southern Baptist Convention? Yesssssss.

Southern Baptist spies spying on a Southern Baptist seminary. Yesssssss. Literally – of course! (You'd have to be there to get that joke!) There were men who quit their day jobs, got endorsements from their home churches, enrolled at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and moved their families to Louisville, to serve as agents in the project (or *conspiracy*, depending on your perspective) to take over the entire SBC leadership, including the boards and faculties of the seven seminaries – since, where is the liberal menace always rooted? The academy. And no one was more dangerous to the SBC, apparently, than my seminary professors. Which is hysterical to anyone who has ever met ANY seminary professors.

It makes me laugh now, but at the time it was such a big thing. The profound violation. Classrooms are sacred space. Some professors were so badly shaken by it. Others were so righteously angry and awesomely brave. They ALWAYS knew who the spies were. Frank Tupper would say, "*Son, come put your tape recorder on my lectern today. Your bosses won't want to miss this!*"

Jesus's spies knew he was on to them too. Matthew says so in chapter 21, when Jesus told them *tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you*. It wasn't a compliment. In fact it was, just not to them. They wanted to arrest him. But in addition to being offended and mad, they were cowards, afraid their base would turn on them. But Jesus has come for a fight with the enemies of God's unconditional grace, and a fight he will have.

So pours up a third parable. And with it these spies find their spines. What happens when the misery we fear is more agitating than the misery we have? We change. With this parable about a wedding, the spies change – from wanting to arrest Jesus to an active, organized plan involving multiple actors and engagements, narrated over the remaining chapters of Matthew's gospel, as well told as a BBC crime series. In all their secret

meetings and plot twists, not once do Jesus's enemies even suspect they are the ones being played.

The wedding supper – THE Bible party of parties: food, wine, food, wine, and more food. The wrap-up image for the entire Christian Bible is a wedding supper hosted by a king for the Lamb and his bride, in Revelation, chapter 21. Allegory through and through, of course, written by the Apostle John who opens Jesus's public ministry at a wedding – the wedding at Cana. Wine. Wine. And more wine. Because for all that God has done so far, the best is yet to be. Just like when our children marry, we know that life will carry on, beyond the border of our own.

Once there was a human king, Jesus's story begins, whose son was getting married. All the A-list people in town were invited, but no one wanted to go. So they politely declined. The king put out a second invite, this time including the menu, and "gosh darn if I don't have to work that day," said nearly everyone on the A-list. The rest were so offended to be asked again, they seized and killed the messengers, lest the king not take the hint this time. "Not only do we not want to come to your party, sir, we don't want to be invited!"

To what might you be invited, that the invitation itself would offend you, make you want to kill the mailman? The king took the hint. Matthew says *he was enraged, called up his army to wipe out those murderers and burn the city down*. Yikes! Can you think of anyone who might actually have done a thing like that? Rome, right? In 70 CE? Why might Matthew refer to Rome in the middle of a Jesus parable? Hang on to that for later....

Having annihilated his A-list guests, the king puts out his third invitation – anyone still breathing, *good and bad alike*. He has found his people, the wedding hall is jammed – with Baptists, no doubt; none are more faithful when free food is at stake. Folks are dancing and eating and laughing. Everyone is dressed to the nines. The bartenders are busy. The caterers are busy. But there is this one guy, off by himself . . . looking sketchy. You know the look, when someone seems not to know where they are. Have you ever been that person?

This isn't my story, but my good friend's. He is so open and unpretentious and crazy, things are always happening to him. He was dropping off his kid for a class at Ivy Tech, and they had to hunt for the room it was in. As he was leaving, he heard an event going on and he recognized the piano music. The musician was a friend of his, so naturally, he thought he'd say Hi. Well, then he noticed this awesome buffet, so he got a plate.

Then he saw someone he knew and started talking to them, and they said, "Wow, I'm so surprised to see you here." And he was like all, "Oh yeah, I heard so-and-so playing piano. This is so cool." Then someone called the room to attention and started talking. And my hilarious, naïve friend realized he was at a fancy political fundraiser to which

everyone but him had been invited and was expected to write a check. So he had to casually work his way to a side door and get out without looking like he'd just figured out that he wasn't supposed to be there.

I do not know how the sketchy man in the parable got in without a wedding robe. But he did. And he was the only one. *"How did you get in here dressed like this, friend?"* The implication being that everyone else *did have a wedding robe*, whatever that means, that *good and bad alike* had come through the front door and the changing room where the robes were handed out. Maybe he slipped through the locker room in his street clothes. Or maybe came through some other door, having no idea what he'd been invited to. The question just hangs there, *"How did you get in here, friend?"* Friend doesn't say a word. *Speechless*, goes the text. The parable turns mean. *Bind him hand and foot. Toss him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Many are called; few are chosen.*

And we are left to figure out what to do with that. Thoughts? Either the king is a sociopath or something else is going on – something that lands this speechless guy in street clothes in the same place as all those folks who refused the first two invitations. Any ideas? 'Cause I've got no answers.

I have one idea. Working backwards I notice that in this parable and both parables in chapter 21, Jesus sorts characters into two groups: receivers and rejecters – sons receiving or rejecting direction from their father; workers receiving and rejecting orders from their master; guests rejecting and receiving invitations to a feast.

Some promise fealty, then aren't faithful. Others make no such promise, then turn out to be faithful. Is that what Jesus means by *good and bad alike*? The disciples who think they will go to the cross with Jesus, but don't. The Pharisees who oppose him, but end up believing he is the Christ? What we do know is that finally, finally, finally, finally, finally, the wedding hall was full. The kingdom of God, that is. Everyone is there.

Does Jesus mean us to imagine no one is any place else? That this party is all there is anywhere? That everyone who ever lived and breathed is now included in *the good and bad alike*? So that every person everywhere finds themselves tempted to move to the music of grace, because there is no such thing as saying no? as saying no to grace? But there he stands, eating his vegan snack, refusing to dance. And God will not force him. Because a truly graceful God wouldn't MAKE us accept grace we didn't want.

See, I do kind of get a guy who goes to a party and then realizes it's not the party that he thought it was. I tell myself I'm all for this all-inclusive grace. Then you know what happens? I get seated at a table with this very nice pastor who starts telling me all about his ventriloquist ministry – I promise I am not making this up – and I am nodding and smiling, but inside I am just dying. I am all sweaty and nervous, and I feel guilty because

I feel so embarrassed about preaching in the first place and when you add in ventriloquism I just can't stand it.

So I totally get somebody looking around at who else has been invited to this gig and thinking *Oh man*, and then feeling like a jerk for thinking *Oh man*. And if they understood him, which they clearly did, it's no wonder these spies listening to Jesus got so upset. Matthew calls them chief priests and Pharisees, but that's probably just Matthew's veiled way – his own parable language for Jewish Christians who didn't want to party with Gentiles. *Can you baa-leeve how they let their goat cheese touch their hamburgers? Seriously, how gross is that?*

The parable does turn mean, but only after the guest tries to rewrite the invitation, so that it's for whatever party he thinks he'd like better than this one. "*How did you get in here, friend?*" For him to say a word is to admit he is where he is – to accept the invitation as is! Because there is no language for saying No to a party he's already at.

The words are harsh for sure: *seized and bound; weeping; gnashing teeth*. They're Bible talk for hell – the only place God isn't. Also known as nowhere. Darkness, though that's a word I'd trade for *emptiness*. *Where God isn't*, is the grace-less place, the accommodation of the ever-graceful God who won't force grace upon us even when, once tasted, grace isn't what we want – if you can imagine that.

Would you pray with me?