

Exodus 32:1-14 “And the LORD changed his mind.”

Philippians 4:1-9 “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Matthew 22:1-14 “Invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

The Realm of God Is Not Like This at All

O God of compassion and justice, may we have the wisdom, the strength, and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth – come when it may and cost what it will.

I wonder how many of you felt reluctant to respond “Praise to you, O Christ” when I said, “The Gospel of the Lord.” I wonder how many of you just didn’t say anything – dumb-struck by the violent narrative that I just proclaimed as Gospel and unwilling to offer assent. It makes me want to remind you of what I often say: there’s plenty of elbow room in a proclamation like “The Word of the Lord” or “The Gospel of the Lord,” or even “The Body of Christ” that does not exist when the declarative words “This is” are added to the beginning. Do you follow?

To my ears, if I hear, “This is the Word of the Lord,” I am hearing something quite different than “The Word of the Lord.” To the first, (this is the Word of the Lord) I usually mutter, “well maybe and maybe not.” (And that’s if I’m feeling generous.) The latter (“the Word of the Lord” without the words, “this is,”) is more of a statement of searching than of finding, and I find myself more ready to give thanks and praise for the search. I can more often say “amen” to a statement acknowledging the journey than I can to an announcement of any particular communal arrival. The words in our written liturgical tradition don’t include “this is,” although I notice that ministers of the Word and Sacraments in Episcopal Churches often add these words in spoken practice. I want to strongly encourage *our* ministers of the Word and Sacraments to leave some room for the rest of us by refraining from adding “this is.”

But elbow room alone won’t help us with this harsh parable of the wedding feast -- *unless* we want to get in touch with why people with power and privilege found Jesus so offensive and even dangerous. In this story that he tells, “Slaves who are doing nothing more offensive than passing out invitations to a wedding banquet are slaughtered and killed by the invitees. A king has meat thrown on to the grill in preparation for a feast to celebrate the wedding of his son—and then takes the time to send out his troops to burn down a nearby city. That same king then sends out his servants far and wide to recruit more people for the wedding feast. But when one newly invited person shows up in everyday clothes, he is not just sent home, he is bound hand and foot and ‘thrown into the outer darkness.’”¹

There are parallel versions of this parable in Luke and in the Gospel of Thomas. There’s also a parallel in the Talmud, attributed to a first-century rabbi, which are all non-violent.² But

¹ Carter Lester, *Interpretation* 62 no 3 JI 2008, p 308-310.

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1990): “This may be compared to a king who summoned his servants to a banquet without appointing a time. The wise ones adorned themselves and sat at the door of the palace, [“for”], said they, “is anything lacking in a royal palace?” The fools went about their work, saying, “can there be a banquet without preparations?” Suddenly the king desired [the presence] of his servants: the wise entered adorned, while the fools entered soiled. The king rejoiced at the wise but

Matthew's version of this story is particularly and uniquely ugly. It is the third in his violent trilogy of parables in which characters lie, cheat and murder, and decimate a city. The telling of the trilogy is set in the Jerusalem Temple where, according to Matthew, Jesus was making the religious authorities mad enough to have him arrested by the Roman soldiers just two days later.

Of course, Matthew was also writing to a particular audience – a church in the end of the first century – and as far as scholars can tell, his context was every bit as tense. Jerusalem had been burned – utterly destroyed by the Romans. The religious practice of faithful Jews had been shattered and there was a lot of blaming and shaming going on, some of which got codified in this Gospel. Real life characters had been lying, cheating and murdering and decimating cities. I imagine this nightmarish scenario speaking to people whose communities were being torn apart by violence. I can imagine a certain appeal to a teaching story where someone who has accepted a generous invitation into a banquet, but who has not decked himself with gladness or put on the garment of compassion and justice, and gets tossed out forever – you know, as an extreme warning to get people to behave themselves. I get that.

And yet that's not what I think this story is about on a deeper level. I do not believe that the king in this parable represents God and I do not believe that the banquet hall stands for the kingdom of heaven any more than I believe that the proper wedding garment means a gown or a tuxedo. We get so confused with our churchy references in prayers and hymns to God as King or Christ as King because of our own historical access to power and privilege, and the violence of our own kings, that we forget what a radical anti-imperial statement that calling God "King" really is. If we call God "King," that means that no-one else has authority over us. If Christ is King that means that Caesar is not king: that means military power and wealth are not the ultimate authority. But in church, when we hear King, we think God. And so when we hear a parable about a King it's almost impossible not to hear the King as standing for the Source of all Being.

Theologian Marty Aiken describes what he calls the "enormous inertial pull" of the traditional reading of the king standing for God as being like gravity that "has acquired such mass that it almost transforms Jesus' words and Matthew's text into a black hole that pulls into itself any attempt to read the parable differently." But if we can get free from trying to see how this king might stand for God, we might be able to remember that already in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus has taught that folks do not need to worry about what they are to wear. We might be able to remember that Jesus has already taught that everyone is welcome in God's realm and that God's mercy and compassion are extravagant – without measure. We might be able to remember from the stories of the Exodus, that what God has always wanted for God's people is freedom from violence and oppression (and that God changes God's mind toward mercy frequently.) If we can get free from trying to see how this king might stand for God, we might see that this king has issued an offer that people can't refuse – this king is more like a mafia boss. This king is more like a brutal dictator. More like – well – Herod.

We might remember that earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Herod the Great told the wise men from the east that he wanted help finding the child Jesus so he could pay Jesus homage (when what he really wanted to do was annihilate him) and when that plan failed, he ordered the slaughter of all of the children in and around Bethlehem. We might remember that Herod the

was angry with the fools. "Those who adorned themselves for the banquet," ordered he, "let them sit, eat and drink. But those who did not adorn themselves for the banquet, let them stand and watch."

Great's son, Herod Antipas, imprisoned John the Baptist and when Jesus heard the news he said, "the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." Later, Herod ordered John the Baptist to be beheaded at a great banquet.³ And finally, we might remember that it's Jesus, according to Matthew, who beckons, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Here's what I think. If this parable can be read as an allegory, I would say that it's a sad allegory of the Church and not of the realm of God. And if God is in this allegory, God is not the king. If God is in this allegory, then God is the One (capital O) who is bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness when we, the ones invited to the banquet, discover that God does not appear the way we think God should appear. It is the Church which ties up God hands and feet when God doesn't behave the way we think God should behave. It is we who throw God into the outer darkness. For Matthew, it was Jesus, God incarnate, whose hands and feet were bound and Who was hung out to dry. It's not many verses from here, in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, that Jesus teaches that what we have done to the least and the lost and the last, we have done to him.

You know, before Jesus tells this story in the Gospel of Matthew, he says, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." As it turns out, it may be compared to this horrific story and it *will* be found to be nothing like it at all. The realm of God is not like this at all.

I think what's being illustrated with this parable is that the kingdom of heaven -- the realm of God -- suffers violence at the hand of tyrants (tyrants out there and the tyrants that live in every one of us). This is not a teaching about God being "violent for a good reason." This is no Gospel justification for brutality. Rather, this is a story of the way that God suffers because of the violence of the kingdoms of this world—even and especially violence done by, or supported by, the Church in the name of God.

And so when we get to the end of our worship service today and sing our closing hymn, "Rejoice, ye pure in heart" let's remember that every one of us has purity in our hearts, and not one of us is entirely pure in heart. Let's remember that the standard of the realm of God, to which Jesus testified with his whole life, is never violence. The toil we are being called to is the work of beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Let's reconsider the regrettable labeling of ourselves as warriors and perhaps exchange it for the word workers. When we lift high the cross, what we are to be proclaiming is what Jesus was living and dying to get people to see --the miracle of God's abiding love even -- and especially -- in the midst of chaos and confusion and violence; that no amount of evil can triumph over God, that is, Love (with a capital L).

³ W. Martin Aiken, "[The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence: Discerning the Suffering Servant in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet.](#)" presented at the Colloquium on Violence & Religion Conference in 2003, Innsbruck.