

Week of September 12, 2021

Matthew 22:1-14

^{22:1} Jesus responded by speaking again in parables: ² “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. ³ He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn’t want to come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants and said to them, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Look, the meal is all prepared. I’ve butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything’s ready. Come to the wedding party!’” ⁵ But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. ⁶ The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was angry. He sent his soldiers to destroy those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸ Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding party is prepared, but those who were invited weren’t worthy. ⁹ Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of town and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.’ ¹⁰ Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests. ¹¹ Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn’t wearing wedding clothes. ¹² He said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ But he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to his servants, ‘Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.’ ¹⁴ Many people are invited, but few people are chosen.”

The Wedding Feast Parable

In response to the religious leaders who were incensed at Jesus for calling them out for their lack of faith, he told a rather dark parable about something that should be joyful - a wedding feast. The “king as a metaphor for God” trope was common for Judaism of the day, so it was expressly clear to the audience what Jesus was setting up when the parable began with a king. This metaphorical king was planning a wedding feast, which is a fun event in our own time, but was massive in the ancient world. A wedding, and the feast that followed, was one of the fullest embodiments of hospitality in a world where hospitality was among the most highly valued virtues. But, in the story Jesus told, everyone who had been invited by the king turned their backs on him. This type of action was seen as unfathomable - not only had an entire community rejected the hospitality that was so intrinsic in their culture, but they rejected it from the king. The rejection of the invitation wasn’t just a simple “no” either, some of those invited went as far as killing the servants who acted as messengers. Then it got even darker, because the king sought revenge on all those who’d acted so callously, burning their city to the ground. But then some light - new invitations were sent to everyone who could be found, both the bad and the good. The only expectation was that they’d show up appropriately. One did not, however, and he was not treated kindly, as he was bound and thrown out into a dark place.

From the outset, the Kingdom of Heaven sounds like kind of a scary place. But this parable was more than a simple illustration to describe what Heaven is like, it examined a long history of God acting for the people and the people rejecting God. The messengers murdered by the invitees might be understood as the prophets who had called on Israel and Judah to change their ways, and who were ignored, ridiculed, and even killed for their messages. In response to the people’s rejection, Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were sent to exile. Then the invitation list was expanded, a sign that God was welcoming more than just Israel, but to accept the invitation meant a change - clothes in the parable, but in reality a change in the heart and life of the people. The one who had not changed, and was thus thrown into the outer darkness, was one who rejected the notion that he needed to change. Maybe that was the religious leaders, who certainly rejected such a notion, or maybe it’s us.

This dark parable is both a gift and a warning. It’s a gift because we know that despite being unworthy, God has invited us to the great feast which God has prepared. It’s a warning because the invitation comes with strings attached, although they’re not difficult - we’re asked to

show up prepared. When we invite people into our homes, and they show up surly, complaining about every little thing, and generally unthankful for anything, we're probably never going to invite them into our homes again and would be offended at their behavior. In the same way, we need to show up ready to receive all that God has prepared for us, which means aligning our lives with what God has given us. We prepare by being ready to change our hearts and lives to match God's expectations. That work may be difficult - change is never easy - but the reward offered at the feast is worth it. So, let's put on our wedding clothes and prepare ourselves for the feast!

We aren't worthy to be invited to your table, but you have made room for us anyway, O God. For that invitation we give you thanks. In our acceptance of the invitation, all you ask is that we love as you love, that we seek to protect the vulnerable, and use the resources given to us equitable and justly. It's a small price to pay for all you offer in return, but still we struggle. Give us the courage to make the necessary changes in our lives. Guide us on your paths that we might be met with your great feast. In Christ's name we pray - Amen.