Sunday, 10/11/20

**Matthew 22:1-14**

1Once 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. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again 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.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those 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, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then 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.’ 14For many are called, but few are chosen.”

**Sermon**

This passage sometimes gets condensed to a “catch phrase.” That final sentence, “many are called but few are chosen,” is sometimes all people remember from this parable, and the phrase is easily misunderstood and threatening. A lucky few, it seems are chosen, and the rest are thrown into the outer darkness to wail and gnash their teeth. It sounds like the worst kickball game ever: the gym teacher calls all the kids together, the reasonably athletic ones are chosen, and everyone else is cast out. It seems like a fitting end to a story about a king who has a city he rules over ransacked because nobody came to his son’s wedding banquet and then became enraged over someone not dressing right. This somehow feels like every stereotyped I have of wedding rolled into one. Obviously we need to read this story more closely to understand the point that Jesus is making.

Jesus begins this story by saying that this is what the kingdom of heaven can be compared to. That’s not comforting if you start with an impression of God as being angry and punitive. But you could also begin with the image of Jesus coming especially to the poor and vulnerable and eating with sinners and tax collectors. Maybe that’s what the kingdom of heaven is like: a God who approaches us even to the point of becoming human. The king in the story isn’t looking to lock anyone up—he’s throwing a wedding banquet for his son, and he’s inviting everyone. This isn’t an exclusive British affair where only royalty attends and everyone else watches on TV: this king really wants everyone to come. His slaves go out to call everyone to the party, the second time even describing the spread. (It’s like a pre-COVID holiday open house.) This is where the story gets strange. If I were invited to a Christmas party at the governor’s mansion in Augusta I would do everything I could to attend, but the king’s subjects (who must have known they could be coerced) aren’t interested. First we’re just told that people wouldn’t come, then people make light of the shindig and go back to what they were doing, and some of them even rough up the king’s slaves. It seems like a good way to get yourself uninvited.

Apparently, though, in the kingdom of heaven described by Jesus, many are indeed called. Many were called to begin with and were called to the banquet again when they initially refused to come. When they refused to come a second time there’s wrath, but then the doors are thrown open even wider: The king tells his servants to “Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet,” and the servants invite everyone, the good and the bad. I’m reminded that Jesus, who’s telling this story, was accused of eating with prostitutes and tax collectors. That’s probably accurate. In the kingdom of heaven, everyone is invited, regardless of background. Some parties are exclusive: picture a swanky nightclub with a bouncer at the front door, examining each potential guest to see if that person is desirable. The church can be like that, too. We like to judge who looks right The kingdom of heaven isn’t like that: everyone is invited, whether or not their clothes and hair are GQ, regardless of marital status or criminal history. The host wants to see the hall full.

And yet not everybody is chosen. Like a bouncer at a nightclub who’s let someone undesirable slip through, the king spots someone who somehow got in without the right robe. Most readers of this parable agree that this man isn’t underdressed because he can’t afford the robe or wasn’t given enough advanced notice. He gives no excuse for being unprepared. Presumably Jesus isn’t suggesting that the kingdom of heaven will have a dress code. More likely he’s suggesting that this man without a wedding robe has walked into the banquet hall casually, without really intending to join the party. Maybe this man thought he could enter the kingdom of heaven without demonstrating the kind of repentance that Jesus and John the Baptist both say is part of being part of God’s kingdom. John and Jesus both begin their ministries by saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Everyone is invited: John and Jesus make no secret of the kingdom’s nearness and the king in today’s parable sends the invitation out far and wide, but actually entering the kingdom requires a change of heart.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus frames the kingdom as a place on earth where God’s will is done as it is in heaven. In today’s parable many of those who receive an invitation don’t respond because they’re too busy with other things. One person goes back to his business, and another goes back to his farm. They make light of the invitation. Others are offended by it.

The wailing and gnashing of teeth are scary, but that’s not what we’re meant to focus on. The kingdom is portrayed as a banquet that we’re all invited to.