

Wearing our Welcome

This morning we are jumping ahead a bit. Last week we heard Jesus preach a parable about workers in a vineyard. He then responds to the mother of James and John who wants her boys to be given positions of honor in the kingdom. Jesus is quick to tell her that she does not know what it is that she is asking. Things are about to get real, as some would say. Moved by compassion, Jesus heals two blind men in Jericho. And then comes his entry into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He storms into the temple and runs off the moneychangers, which places him, even more clearly on the bad side of the religious authorities than he was before. They in turn question his authority, and he speaks to them in parables. Our text for today is part of what I imagine is a prolonged and heated exchange between Jesus and those religious leaders in the midst of the temple, the very place in the ancient Jewish community where the presence of God was understood to reside most visibly on earth. [Matthew 22:1-14]

I'll let you in on a trade secret...if you want to make 21st century mainline preachers squirm, ask them to preach on a text that includes horrific violence and phrases such as “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In an age when the pews are not as full as everyone remembers their being in decades past, preachers are tempted to soft-peddle and please, to paint Jesus and the gospel with pastels, as one scholar says, to emphasize God's love and welcome.¹ The last thing anyone wants to preach about is who might not be fit for the kingdom of heaven, or about a God who might dare to exclude some, punishing them along the way. Honestly, most of us preacher types would much rather preach Luke's version of this parable which notably leaves out any of the stuff that makes us want to duck out and head to Starbucks for a nice, conflict-free morning over a cup of coffee and the Sunday paper. But Matthew's text is gospel, too, good news in an often bad news world, so here we go.

It is important to remember who exactly Jesus is speaking and preaching to here. He has marched into the temple after being celebrated by the people who could never imagine being invited to a royal wedding. As I reread the texts leading up to this one, I was struck by what Jesus does in the temple. He turns over tables; he hears children crying; and he heals the blind and the lame, all while the chief priests and the scribes watch. And while they watch, they begin to talk and wonder. And Jesus speaks to them in parables. The first is about two sons, one who does what

¹ Dr. Craig Koester, http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1118

his father asks, and the other who does not. Then he speaks of yet another vineyard where the tenants kill the landowner's son, thinking they can get his inheritance. The chief priests and scribes soon realize Jesus is talking about them, and the text tells us that they want to arrest him then and there, but "they fear the crowds, because they regarded [Jesus] as a prophet."² Then Jesus—sounding very much like an Old Testament prophet speaking truth to power—tells the parable we just heard.

This parable has so many rough edges. In an era that seems bent on settling scores with violence and a time when we are inundated with images of weeping and teeth gnashing in real time, these images ring all too true. They would have rung true for Matthew's original hearers, too. They would be well acquainted with the violent ways of the Roman Empire and the destruction in 70 AD of the very temple where today's telling takes place. In other words, the scenes Jesus paints are not foreign or far away at all. But these images are still shocking, and unlike anything we typically associate with the kingdom of heaven. Yet again, Matthew is painting a powerful picture of the kingdom Jesus ushers in. This is not a "precious moments" kingdom painted in soft and easy to stomach pastels. This is a flesh and blood kingdom on earth, where God in Jesus has expectations and demands. These expectations are nothing new. You may recall that Jesus comes to fulfill the law and the prophets, to reveal more fully what life in covenant with God is supposed to look like. The chief priests and the scribes should know the law and the prophets by heart; they should embody what it is to live in covenant with God and neighbor, but apparently they do not.

To drive this point home, Jesus uses the image of a king's inviting guests to a banquet to celebrate his son's marriage. The "Save the Date" cards go out, so to speak, and the formal invitations arrive a bit later. And the expected guests cannot be bothered to attend. Scholars have all sorts of ideas about why this is: they are well fed and don't need the luxury of a banquet; they don't feel any need to be in this king's good graces; they are caught up in the things of life, and this wedding banquet just is not a priority. My colleague Meg Peery McLaughlin notes that the Greek verb that the text I read translates as "made light of" can also be translated "disregard or neglect."³ For all of the vibrant imagery and shocking language in this parable, I find this one word to be the most damning. As Jesus preaches and teaches and tries his best to bring the religious leaders around, he seems angry and brokenhearted that these leaders have failed to do what God has called them to do. He grieves that those who have been given the sacred

² Matthew 21:45-46, NRSV

³ In her paper for the Well, 2008.

responsibility of leading others in life under the covenant have disregarded or neglected the covenant and the people. Maybe it's a stretch, but I can't stop seeing Jesus' healing people in the temple while the temple leaders stand by with arms folded and eyes fixed on him to see what he does wrong next. And Jesus has had it; he is done with this and them, it seems.

After the king decides to invite anyone and everyone, there's that whole problem of the one guest who is not properly attired. It doesn't seem right, does it? After all, where does a nobody brought in from the highways and byways get a tux on short notice? It seems like he is set up to fail. Scholars tell us that it was common practice for the host of such a feast to provide gowns for everyone to wear. All are welcome, but all are expected to put on the gown the host provides. Could it be that this one guest is showing disregard as well? Could his refusal to wear the robe be its own kind of neglect? Yes, all are welcome, but when we enter the kingdom, when we accept the invitation, we are expected to understand that there are expectations.

When the king in the parable confronts the guest without the robe, the guest is speechless. He has nothing to say. Perhaps it is because he has no excuse, no explanation. He has simply chosen not to wear the welcome he has been offered. He is not fit for the kingdom, because he refuses to be fitted for a robe. He is not dressed appropriately for the party.

Too often this text has been wielded as a weapon to denounce Jews and insist that the church is the faithful replacement for the Jewish community. Not only is that wrong and blasphemous, it lets the church, it lets us off the hook. It has been easy for those of us who claim the name of Christ to neglect what that means, to disregard the fundamental claim it makes on us, to wear our welcome in all that we do and all that we are. This text is not about those people out there. Here, Jesus is on the inside speaking to insiders. They have been welcomed into the covenant community with open arms, but they have lost sight of just how transformative that welcome is intended to be. And so as an insider, I am cut to the quick by Jesus' words, because I am sure that there are things, sacred, covenant things that I and the church neglect. Yes, we are quick to say all are welcome, but how do we who have heard the grand invitation and accepted the gracious welcome respond? How do we wear that welcome? The banquet is not a one-time, pop-up affair. The kingdom of heaven has come near in Jesus Christ. We live in the midst of that kingdom, in the thick of that banquet, which means wearing that robe day in and day out; the robe does not go on the coat rack when I tire of wearing it, or at least it's not supposed to. This text tells me that the church's failings are not strictly

about the vicious attacks or the heinous acts that have been committed in the name of the faith. Yes, the religious leaders in our text will go on to do those, too. But I hear Jesus calling them out for the everyday, slippery slope neglect that comes from growing complacent about the hurting ones and the systems that keep them from being healed. I sense that it's the disregard for the children whose names we don't know; it's our turning away from these children who have been torn from their parents and left to suffer any number of horrors because the ones charged with their care are themselves neglectful at best and predatory at worst. It's the disregard of school systems that inordinately fail children of color. It's the disdain for those on the other side of the aisle. It's the neglect of fellow beloved children of God who continue to be persecuted and demonized because of the color of their skin, the nation they claim as home, the poverty that drowns them, the way they worship, or the person they love. And too often we—like the improperly attired wedding guest—stand by, speechless.

But there are some who refuse to stand by, who refuse to be silent. Members of the Mighty Mongrel Mob, a biker gang in New Zealand showed up on Friday to protect worshipers while they prayed at the mosques that had been attacked just a week before. Sonny Fatu, the president of a local chapter said:

We will support and assist our Muslim brothers and sisters for however long they need us...the question was posed whether we could be a part of the safety net for them to allow them to pray in peace without fear...Of course we would do that, there was no question about that and we will be dressed appropriately.⁴

These men—many of whom have shaved heads and are covered with tattoos and piercings—showed up on Friday to stand with brothers and sisters, frightened fellow children of God and help them pray in peace. I do not know the bikers' backstory. I do not know which God they claim to worship—if any—but on Friday I firmly believe they were dressed appropriately, no matter what their clothes looked like. My hope is that we the church might learn from them and others like them. My prayer is that we, too, will be dressed appropriately, that we will wear our welcome well, that we will find our voice, that we will be found fit for the kingdom and worthy of our good and gracious king who is determined to welcome us one and all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/biker-gangs-stand-guard-outside-nz-mosques-during-first-friday-prayer-since-massacre-a4096341.html>