



BIBLE STUDY for the TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST



Focus text: Matthew 22: 1 - 14

Additional texts: Exodus 32: 1 - 14; Psalm 106: 1 - 6, 20 - 24; Philippians 4: 1 - 9

After the parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33-46) last Sunday, Jesus gives another parable, the Wedding Banquet. In this parable, the kingdom of God is compared to a king who invites wedding guests for his son. But what can we learn about the kingdom of God, since this king is hard to understand, given his violence against the invited guests who rejected his invitation and his harsh treatment of a wedding guest who did not wear a wedding robe?

Before we begin to explore this parable, one caveat is necessary. A parable is not intended for literal interpretation. It is not a real-life story but a fictional, subversive story that surprises audiences. While the allegory (a story with a hidden moral meaning) may be seen in a parable, it should not control its meaning, because the parable employs subversive language that reverses traditional thinking or systems. We do not have to make arbitrary links between textual elements and external references. For example, while the king is like God in some sense, he is not the same as God. Likewise, his son is not Jesus. His slaves who went out to call the invited guests are not prophets, and invited guests are not Israel. Allegorical interpretation is not wrong but has limitations because it tones down the deeper, radical, urgent message of the kingdom of God in everyday life.

Indeed, the allegorical interpretation cannot explain the complexities in the parable of the wedding banquet. For example, why did the king not invite everyone on the main streets, both good and bad, to his banquet from the beginning? How could the invited guests reject the king's invitation? Such rejection is unreal and social death in a traditional society where a patron-client system is prevalent. Furthermore, the king's extreme violence against the refusing guests and harsh treatment of a guest who did not wear a wedding robe can hardly make sense if he is compared to God.

So what can we learn from this parable? What is the radical, subversive message of this parable? One possibility is to focus on the literary context where Jesus challenges the uncaring work of the chief priests and the elders. In other words, this parable is a continuation of the earlier two parables, Two Sons and the Wicked Tenants, because nothing is more important than doing the will of God. Even though they were called/invited by God to do God's work, they neglected it, making themselves busy with their own businesses. But God does not give up on saving people and calls others for that task. The subversive message is that the position and authority of religious leaders/elites will not last forever because God will open a new door, break traditions into pieces, and continue the work through other people. The way of God is radical and revolutionary in that regard. So much so, that the initial invitation extends to all others, whoever they are. Those who respond to God's invitation and do God's work are worthy of God's kingdom and the eschatological (end times) banquet.

In Matthew's context, this parable challenges the community members to do the work of God because they were called and invited by God. If they do not continue to do so, they will lose their seat at the ultimate banquet. As God's servants, they should not discriminate against anyone; rather, they must invite everyone from the beginning, both the good and bad. In this sense, the king's behaviour in selecting wedding guests is not prudent. The proper conduct of the king is shown in his second action: he sends his servants to everyone on the streets. This action is clear and consistent with Matthew's theology that God's love extends to all. No one is excluded from the community of the beloved. For Matthew, judgment of the good and the bad does not happen now, only at the end.

Lastly, Matthew puts this parable in the daily ministry context in which those who are called must prove their identity with the work of God. The title/position of a person or tradition of any sort is not a guarantee to please God or to serve people. The wedding robe as a metaphor may allude to the provable Christian life for the kingdom of God. For Matthew, final judgment is inevitable, and the desirable moral code for the Christian is a positive one. Because God is loving and perfect, they must be also an imitator of God.

Matthew's conclusion in verse 14 is, "*many are called, but few are chosen.*" "Called" is an invitation, and "chosen" means God's approval of that call because of good outcomes. If one does not respond to God's call by doing the will of God, such an invitation is futile and is not realized in one's life. Those who respond to God's call are the chosen.

(From the Working Preacher website)

Take some time now to contemplate the kingdom of God. As God followers, we are called to enlarge God's kingdom.

Are you responding to this call? How?

Do you share God's love without discrimination, to both the good and the bad?

Let us pray

Lord of the feast,

you have prepared a table before all peoples

and poured out life with such abundance

that death cannot claim the triumph over your universe.

Call us again to your banquet where we may receive your holy food,

and strengthened by what is honourable, just, and pure,

be transformed into a people of righteousness and peace.

Amen

