

Narrative Lectionary: Wedding Banquet  
March 24, 2019

March is Portland Dining Month, so that means there's a bunch of restaurants that have a \$33 three-course dinner that might normally cost much more than that. Our family went out to dinner last week at a place called Jackrabbit and had a ball trying some new food, and laughing together, and drinking some interesting cocktails (I had one called a Green Monster that had, of all things, fish sauce in it! I was imagining the bar tender inventing this drink, and saying, after she put in a bunch of ingredients: it just needs one more thing? I know...fish sauce!)

If I asked you to share a great memory from your life, I wouldn't be surprised if it revolved around food. Food with family, food with friends, food around the holidays...turkey and cranberry sauce, a fantastic pizza, a wonderful, crisp salad; the right beverage to go along with it. I'm probably making us all hungry.

It's no wonder that the image of a banquet is so often used for the kingdom of God. God throws a party! That's different than saying the kingdom of God is like a rulebook, and you better obey the rules. No, the kingdom of God is a party! There's joy, and laughter, and singing, and story-telling, and humor.

Vern Reed was a member here for ten years, until he and Myrna moved to Denver. His memorial service was yesterday in Denver. I asked some of you to tell me some stories, to give me some memories so I could send them to Myrna. You know what I heard? I heard about his story-telling and his jokes and that mischievous twinkle in his eye. That's a little taste of the reign of God! Jesus got in trouble all the time for his dining habits and the people he dined with. In fact, some religious people criticized him saying, Look, a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! (Matthew 11:19) The kingdom of God is like a party, but apparently some people want it to be a rulebook.

So one day Jesus says, The kingdom of heaven is like a king who threw a wedding party for his son. In Jesus' day, just like now, the "save the date" card went out way before the time of the wedding, but when the meat was finally roasted and the wine had arrived and the hall was decorated, the servants would go out to the guests and tell them that now was time to come.

I like that Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a party. Some of us were raised with the idea that the Christian faith was anything but a party. It was a list of rules

and regulations; I can't do this and I'd better do that. In my family we were told we couldn't go to dances, because, you know what happens at dances. And I would say to my dad, No, but I'd sure like to find out. It probably had to do with the way dancing can be suggestive, and can get hormones going in teenagers that get going well enough on their own. And there certainly is some dancing that isn't appropriate. But we couldn't even square-dance!

There wasn't any alcohol in our house, because my mom knew that sometimes people couldn't handle it, so she'd rather not take the chance. So I grew up thinking my Christian faith was more like a set of rules. And if I obeyed them, things would go well with me, and if I didn't, God would find a way to punish me.

And yet Jesus says: The kingdom of God is like a party; it's banquet; it's a feast! It's what happens when a son who's been away comes home, and the dad breaks out the music and dancing and the prized calf, because God in that story implies: I want everybody to come home to the feast of forgiveness and new life and hope that I offer you. The kingdom of God is not a list of rules that buys us salvation; the kingdom of God is a feast for all of creation.

So the king sends out the servants with the final invitation, but the guests have excuses. They won't come. He sends out some more servants, maybe more persuasive servants. They describe the meal to the guests, but this time they make light of the invitation. One of them goes off to his farm; another to his business. In Luke's version of the story, somebody has bought a piece of land; somebody else has bought some oxen; somebody has just gotten married.

And then the story takes a bizarre twist. Some of the guests capture the king's servants, mistreat them, and actually kill them. The story gets more bizarre. The king is enraged at the way his servants were treated, and he sends his troops to destroy these guests and their city. We pause for a minute and ask, The kingdom of heaven is like *THIS*? An enraged king who won't take no for an answer? A king who gets so angry that he kills people who say no? We'll come back to that.

Well, what does the king do now? What do you do when the A list doesn't want to show up? Then the king says to the servants, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup>Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

I want to stop there for a minute and do some interpretation. Remember that each of the gospel writers was addressing his particular community. One theory is that Matthew took a parable of Jesus and allegorized it to speak to his church. And if that's the case, it may look like this: The first set of servants was the Hebrew prophets. God sent the prophets to the people of Israel, and they said: God wants you to come to the party! But the people said: We don't want to go to God's party. We have our own plans. We want to worship these gods over here. We want to exploit the poor and forget all those things you said about taking care of the sojourners in our midst.

And after Jesus came, God sent the apostles to the Jewish people. The apostles said: God's party can be realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but again most of the Jewish people said: We don't believe that Jesus really is God's chosen one. And many of those early missionaries were killed when they tried to give that message. Think of Stephen the first martyr.

And then Matthew adds this bizarre twist to the parable, this verse about the king destroying these people, and burning their city. Matthew, who wrote his gospel in about the year 80AD, could very well have had in mind the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70AD, and his assumption was: Because the Jewish people rejected Jesus, their holy city was destroyed.

I am going to argue with Matthew for a minute. I always think it's dangerous to assume that any event in the world is a sign of God's displeasure, whether it's an army destroying a city or a hurricane tearing up mobile homes or flooding that devastates the heartland. God has set up a world of cause and effect. So I would argue with Matthew on that point. There was cause and effect with the destruction of the temple. The Jewish people rebelled against Rome from 66-70 AD, and Rome came in and crushed them. But the way Matthew retells this parable of Jesus, he is doing some interpretation of history. The king destroys the city of those who didn't come to his banquet.

So what does the king do next? The king says: I want my party to be for anybody who will come! Maybe what Matthew is saying is: Now the whole non-Jewish world is invited to come to God's party. We're moving beyond the Jewish people-Go out in the streets and invite everybody, including all those Gentiles we were told to avoid!

This is a story about the graciousness of God. Because where I want to have my guest lists, where I want to say: God, surely those people can't be included into your kingdom, God says: No, they're invited too.

When Susan and I visited Northern Ireland three years ago, we got a taste for the hatred that had existed for many years between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Things are much better now, but there are wounds from centuries of the Roman Catholic Irish being subjugated and striking back against the Protestants who had the power.

Some years ago I heard a young Irish Catholic man tell a story of growing up without a father, because his dad was killed by a carload of Protestant gunmen. They were on their way to mass one Sunday morning, and a car of masked men pulled up and shot his father dead.

They were driving through a Protestant neighborhood, and the young man grew up remembering that no one even came out to help, or at least, that's what he was told. He spent a long time hating those gunmen, hating all Protestants, and only recently has he begun to realize that he can't base his life on hatred and unforgiveness. He is working through the process of forgiveness, not saying that it was OK what these men did, but that he will not be held captive for the rest of his life to feelings of hatred and revenge.

Later he heard that on the day his dad was murdered, a Protestant neighbor had come out of a nearby house, and put a blanket around his dad, and told him: We'll take care of your son. And when that young man heard that story of what even one Protestant had done, he began to see them in human terms. And he's working on forgiveness.

God says: Everybody is invited to the party! The ones we would label good, and the ones we would label bad. I wonder who we have trouble inviting to God's party, thinking: Surely not them, God? But God invites everybody to the party.

We're having a conversation about a welcome statement here at Prince of Life, and we're having this conversation because there are people, especially in the LGBT community, people made in the image of God, who aren't sure that they are included at the party. They have heard condemnation and judgment from some churches, and they don't know that "all are welcome" includes them. They need it spelled out on their invitation!

But in the parable, people don't want to come to God's party. And by the way, I don't think this means joining the church. God's party is people who are seeking the reign of God, not all of whom are Christians. And these people in the story who

don't want to come- They don't sound like bad people, do they? "I'm a farmer, I have a business to run, I just got married, I just bought some animals." Surely the king can understand that we've got a life to live, right?

You know that old saying that the good can be the enemy of the best. These excuses for not coming to God's party were all good things; but apparently these folks weren't considering the welfare of their neighbor. They weren't looking beyond themselves.

These people who rejected the king's invitation had some pretty good excuses. But these things were keeping them from the best: from the banquet of forgiveness and new life and hope and justice and generosity that God was offering.

But the story goes on. The king sees a guest in the back who doesn't have a wedding robe on, and he says to him: Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe? The man was speechless. And the king has him bound hand and foot, and thrown out into the darkness. And then Jesus says: Many are called, but few are chosen.

Now we hear this, and we think: Wait a minute, give this guy a break. He's not even on the list; he's pulled off the streets to come to a king's banquet; of course he doesn't have a wedding robe! Isn't that unfair of the king to throw him out? And if the king is God, doesn't God accept everybody? What's going on here?

One explanation is that these are two different parables that Jesus told, and Matthew puts them back to back, because they have similar themes: a king, a banquet, guests. But there's a different message here.

Jesus is probably thinking of Isaiah 61:10 here when he talks about a wedding robe: "The Lord has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness." The guy in the back in this second parable doesn't have the robe of God's righteousness on him. He has refused the forgiveness and the grace and the mercy that God offers him. The king says: You have rejected what I want to give to you freely. You cannot stay at the banquet.

In this second parable, Jesus says: If you are going to be a part of God's party, then wear that robe that God has provided you. It looks like letting your light shine before others that they would see your good works; it looks like forgiving the one who has offended you; it looks like loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. That's what wearing the robe looks like.

God gives us the robe; we don't do anything to deserve it. But as we wear that robe of Christ's righteousness, our lives show the fruit of what God is doing in us. This guy in the back doesn't do anything to show that his life has been changed by the king's invitation.

This second parable may be a warning by Matthew to his Christian community. He had people in his church who had been baptized and they were supposedly sitting at the banquet, but their life wasn't showing the transformation that God wanted. The fruit wasn't there. And so in the parable, the king was saying, It's not enough for you to sit there. Your life needs to show it. And if it doesn't, judgment will come. God is serious about this invitation. God is serious about transformation in our lives.

By the way, we are sending out 1000 professionally made postcards to people in our community inviting them to Easter services. We want our neighbors to know about the love of God in Jesus- We want them to know that the kingdom of God is a feast of love and grace and forgiveness and new life. I hope you'll extend that invitation too. Amen.