

Rev. Kimberly Glenn

I can tell you quite honestly, there was weeping and gnashing of teeth, in my mind at least, when I realized this scripture was one of my choices for today's sermon. I mean, this is not the kind of story we like to hear about our loving and merciful God, is it? How could such a God, assuming the king in the parable is an allegory for God, bind anyone hand and foot and throw that person out into the darkness. Isn't our God a forgiving God?

I'm not the only priest who struggles to find meaning that matches with our understanding of God as the purveyor of abundant love. A seminary friend of mine posted a comment about it on a Facebook Page that was set up for our graduating class. She bemoaned the text, wondering why we couldn't just use the version of the same story that is found in Luke's gospel. In Luke's version the host was an unnamed man and the banquet was just a gala for entertainment not a celebration of a wedding. And in Luke's version there was no interloper whose hand and feet were bound and no weeping and gnashing of teeth. Luke was focusing on a different aspect of Jesus' multifaceted ministry. But if Matthew's version were shown on today's television it would contain a warning: This show contains material that may be shocking or offensive to some people. Viewer discretion is advised!

The task before us of unpacking this particular scripture cannot be taken lightly. It is the task of the preacher to make sense of the assigned text and carry that meaning forward into the world in which we live. As your preacher I *could* choose to preach on one of the other texts for today, but that would leave you wondering why the man who wasn't wearing the right clothes got bounced out of the party. So rather than avoiding the shockingly offensive material, let's dig into this parable together.

First I think we need to consider how it might have been heard in the first century. The people lived in different economic classes. Within Hebrew society, there were the kings, the landowners, the laborers and the servants. The people in those days believed that the class you were born into had been ordained by God. They might not have liked their economic circumstance, especially if they were on the lower end of the income ladder, but they had great respect for those who had power. Their respect was shown by honorable behavior; behavior according to societal expectations of the day.

So when the king in this parable issued an invitation to a wedding banquet for his son, that invitation was not to be ignored. Invitees were simply *expected* to attend. When first century listeners heard in the story that the people who were invited made up excuses not to attend, they would have interpreted the refusal as a shameful and also risky act. One just did not shame the powerful without incurring severe consequences. The Greek verb used for refusal is in a tense that suggests that this kind of refusal consistently repeated. It was an ongoing resistance to appropriately honor this king. In other words, they resistance the honor due this king in a blind fashion. Their resistance showed that they were not moved to see things any other way. Their refusal to attend the banquet suggested that the invitees did not consider the host to be the authentic king; that perhaps this king was an imposter and not the king they adored.

Hearing this parable from a non-literal, allegorical perspective, the first century hearers would have understood the king to be God. And they would have understood the first round of invitees to be the chief priests and scribes of the Pharisees. Matthew

placed this particular parable within a series of parables and stories Jesus told while teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem. His audience was the leaders of the synagogue. He told them stories and parables that were meant to point them beyond their entrenched understanding of God to a new and broader understanding of God's Holy Kingdom. Were the Temple elite doubtful that Jesus was describing the God they worshiped? Matthew's clear objective was to draw a distinction between those who claimed to worship God by way of the established rules, laws and worship guidelines and those who instead chose to follow The Way initiated by Jesus, that is the way of Christ.

On the invitation list were the Jewish society leaders who were not interested in the king's offer. They were satisfied with what they had already, a God worshiped according to precise rules and guidelines. Their religion occupied them completely. They had no time to consider a new way of understanding. After all, they had their livelihood to consider. They were too busy to consider making changes.

When the first round of invitees refused the invitation, the king sent servants to issue a second invitation - *to the SAME people*. Doesn't that make you think of the whole Christian story? God invites and invites and continually invites us to see differently, to open ourselves up to a new way of understanding his call on our lives. From Genesis through the New Testament, God invited the Hebrew people over and over again to open their eyes and see that he was continuing to act in their world; continuing to create new opportunities for them to rediscover and grow their relationship with him. First there was Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob and Joseph and Moses. The the prophets. And then, in his most momentous act from our Christian

perspective, he sent John the Baptist and then Jesus. (Some scholars think Matthew alludes allegorically to John the Baptist and Jesus as the second set of servants sent by the King.) In any case, when the second set of servants went out, the invitees “made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated and killed them.” Sounds a lot like the reaction of the Hebrew elite to John the Baptist and Jesus, doesn’t it? Both John and Jesus were mistreated and killed, one by Herod Antipas and one by the Romans with no objection from the Hebrew people.

The king in this parable finally was able to fill his banquet hall with passersby from the town, both bad and good passersby. Does that sound like the people Jesus hung out with? Jesus was open to relationship with *everybody*, the good and the bad. Whether good or bad, these passersby took responsibility for honoring their host. They bothered to acquire the proper garment for attending the banquet before they showed up. Even the bad ones put on the right clothes. But there was one man who showed up who did not honor the host. He had not taken the time or bothered himself at all to dress appropriately. Maybe he just thought he’d wander in and see what the party was all about. Maybe he was curious but didn’t really want to commit. Maybe he just wanted to say to his friends that he had been to the banquet and to report back that the food really wasn’t that good.

I would like to suggest that the garment worn at the wedding banquet in this parable is an allusion to the process, the act of clothing oneself in Christ. In the ancient rite of baptism, in the second and third centuries, participants clothed themselves in a white robe as a symbol of their sacramental union with Christ. There were no infant

baptisms in those days. Only adults made that very special choice to commit to the way of Christ. Baptismal candidates prepared for months, even years, to receive baptism. When that day arrived, the white robe they wore was more symbolic of a wedding gown or wedding suit than a graduation gown. It was more than a once and done garment, it was the symbol of a complete change of spiritual clothing. It is that kind of clothing that those who accepted the invitation the king's banquet were wearing.

You notice, don't you, that the passersby who attended the banquet were good and bad? The invitation was open and free to everyone, but that did not mean there were no requirements of the guests. In this parable, we see that the king, or God, sees the commitment of everyone's hearts. The king, or God, overlooks behavior by which society defines us as good or bad. God knows our flesh is weak, and God knows when we are in the process of donning the wedding garment. The scary thing is that God also knows when we are faking it, when we are just hanging around the table to judge the quality of the food, so to speak. The question for each of us is, who are we in this story?

May God in his vast mercy and through the grace of Christ guide us on our way to the banquet. Each Sunday we are invited to a taste of God's heavenly banquet. As you approach the Holy Table today, don your wedding garment in your mind's eye and then Come, See and Taste that it is good. Then go forth and manifest that goodness in the world.