

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

GOSPEL

Matthew 22:1-14

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the twenty-second chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

When I was about 7, the First Gulf War happened. I don't remember much...but I remember the yellow ribbons and the sense of the weight of worry for those who were far away.

I must have asked my parents why the soldiers had been sent to Kuwait...because I remember my mother trying to explain who Saddam Hussein was and what he had done.

And I got completely stuck in trying to wrap my mind around someone who would willingly hurt people on such a large scale.

Years later I found a letter on some VERY early-90's pink floral stationary...written with the uneven letters of a young hand. I don't remember the words exactly. But it was a letter to Saddam Hussein, and in it I asked him to please stop hurting people. That was the basic idea. Just, please stop hurting people.

The innocence of childhood on that pink floral page was so bittersweet to find.

In the world these days...I'm still struck with that innocent pain sometimes, though...when I wonder why...why do we hurt each other so much? How does anyone come to the point of killing another precious child of God? Not to even begin to imagine fifty-eight...

But, the same thing jumps off the page of the parable Jesus tells today. There is so much violence. Even if it's a story meant as a metaphor or allegory...it's a pretty bloody one. Why is everyone killing everyone?

The formulaic explanation of the parable is fairly well-known. The king is God. The bride-groom is Jesus. The ones who reject the invitation are the Jewish people (a very dangerous reading that we must reject), and the B-list guests who then swing an invite are the Gentiles...but even the Gentiles better play by the king's rules and come to the banquet looking and acting their best. Best foot forward. Game face on. Put together. Dressed to impress. Or else.

There is something fair about pointing out that God's invitation is generous, but it does require something of us. Some interpreters speculate that, at this time, the wedding garment that everyone was expected to wear would have been provided...so not wearing it wouldn't necessarily mean you just didn't know you'd be going to a wedding and your best suit was at the cleaner's. Rather, it could be seen as a rejection of the hospitality and social expectations

of the host. And sometimes, in some places, being willing to accept certain social rules is a condition for being in that space.

On the whole, though, I'm not entirely comfortable with this reading. (Though maybe we're not supposed to be. Jesus isn't a warm fuzzy story teller...Making us comfortable is rarely what he's going for.)

But it is simultaneously comforting (if we see ourselves as the ones who get to be at the party, even though we know we're not really A-list types...ok...I'll speak for myself...I'm not an A-list type), but this reading is still really anxiety-producing (because we apparently only get to stay if we follow all the rules just right)...But overall, this reading is really wholly unsatisfying to me as any kind of analogy for how God works...largely because I don't want stories that reveal truths about the kingdom of God to be full of people killing each other. We have quite enough of that here and now, thank you very much.

At this point in Matthew, we *are* in the middle, still, of Jesus speaking against the religious leaders...so there may be an element of accuracy in this interpretation. But...I wonder...I wonder if there is another way...

Because Jesus is telling us a story about someone cast out of a king's banquet...rejected...immediately after describing *himself* as the stone the builders rejected that would become the cornerstone of God's kingdom.

What if this punitive king and his horrible subjects are meant to show us how *our* view of God, when taken to its extreme, becomes a horror story of pain and rejection...and that's not what God is about? Maybe this parable is a fun house mirror that's showing us the wildly magnified version of our own world to point out how out of touch we really are.

What if this king isn't God at all, and this groom isn't Jesus? More than that, what if *Jesus* is the one who isn't wearing the wedding robe? What if Jesus isn't the one keeping with convention...out on the dance floor in torn up jeans and dirty flip flops? Does that really sound so off-base? Jesus... the one who heals on the Sabbath and declares God's love to the least worthy ones. Jesus...the one about to be killed because his message doesn't fit the narrative of power in the world. What if the ones doing the killing and rejecting are NOT representatives of the Kingdom of God? What if that's us? What if *we're* the ones obsessed with

social status, dress codes, revenge, and power? That sounds closer to true...to me.

(Lest you think too highly of my interpretative skills, I owe this possible reading largely to Reverend Doctor Janet Hunt. And I really love that this parable can push our thinking so much wider in so many different directions.)

The really wild thing about the kingdom of God is that it defies boundaries. It defies binaries. It defies our notions of deserving-ness.

In a few minutes, we'll get the chance to offer our gifts to God...and particularly our pledges for the coming year, if we choose. I *could* say something today about how our willingness to embrace God's gifts and invitation by responding with returning our gifts to God is like accepting the wedding robe we wear to the kingdom's wedding feast.

But, the fact is, I think Jesus is dancing around in his dusty sandals and t-shirt...with whoever he can coax onto the dance floor. And he doesn't charge admission or check credentials.

If we want to celebrate being at the party by offering what we have to the service of widening the circle of the celebration, we sure can. But there are no requirements to receive this invitation, and no conditions on keeping it. Jesus is just going to keep dancing.

Our offering time is going to be a little bit longer today as we give weekly offerings as well as pledges.

Sometimes I wonder if offering plates are becoming an anachronism. So many people give electronically, or through means other than a weekly check or bills in the plate. But this moment of passing that basket still signifies so much, I think. So, whether you place a gift or pledge into the basket today or not. I invite you to really take your time. To hold that basket in your hands and reflect on what it means to you...you can reflect on the gifts in your life...and what you wish to offer back to God and the world. You can reflect on what it means to give when the invitation to be a part of what God is doing doesn't rest at all on whether you do or not. Let the passing of that basket be a moment of prayer today, if you will. Not a prayer of worry about whether we will give

enough to not get kicked out of the party...but a prayer of thanks that we are at this banquet with our Lord and our siblings in Christ...a prayer of thanks that we can invite others to the banquet, too, and promise them that there is a place for them here...because the most unacceptable one of us all is the one who sent the invitations...and it turns out, he knows so much better than we do what love and joy and the kingdom of God look like. And he's here to teach us how to dance.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.