

Another parable about the kingdom of God. They come right after one another in this part of Matthew. Two weeks ago the parable was about two sons – the one who said no but did what his father asked and the other who said yes but did not do what his father asked. Last week the parable was about the wicked tenants who wanted the owners vineyard for themselves and killed the owners messenger and even his son in the hopes of keeping it.

This week the parable is about a wedding banquet given by a king. His invited guests don't show up and even when the king sends his servants to say the banquet is ready, they give excuses as to why they can't come. The king is furious and tells his servants to go out into the main thoroughfare and invite whomever they can find. The banquet hall is filled and the celebration begins. Sounds wonderful doesn't it. I love the image of the people on the street being invited in to be the guests and who get to eat the special fatted calves and other wedding delicacies. The solo you will hear during communion reflects this - I'm gonna eat at the welcome table one of these days. For me, this is the kingdom of God – a table where all are welcome - even those you might not expect.

However, I have left out some parts of this parable as Matthew tells it. The invited guests don't just don't show up, they beat and even kill the servants the king sends to let them know the banquet is ready. The king is so angry with them that he sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

And then when the second round of guests arrive – the ones from off the street, there is one without a wedding garment. The king wants to know how he got in and then gives instruction to 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Whoa – not very welcoming at all. This story has some dark sides to it. In times I've preached this gospel before, I've worked hard to find interpretations where God doesn't come off as a vengeful king. I presented the king's severe treatment of the invited guests who didn't show up as a strong reminder to not ignore God's invitation. As for the guest without the garment, I wondered if wedding attire was readily available and this guest ignored it out of disrespect or not really wanting to be there. One could say that showing up to God's kingdom when you don't want to be there simply doesn't work.

Debie Thomas from the website, Journey with Jesus¹, asks a great question - why do we try to make this version of the story OK when it isn't OK? She goes on to point out how horrible story it is. "Invited guests who would rather commit murder than attend their sovereign's royal wedding? A king who invites a homeless guy into his palace and then banishes him for lacking formalwear?"

¹<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2777-the-god-who-isn-t>

Debie Thomas challenges us to deal with this parable not being OK and offers a different interpretation. What if instead of the king being God, we are the king who is furious with the guests that don't come and burns their city? What if we are the ones who throw out the guest without the proper garment? It doesn't make the parable any easier to deal with, but Jesus' parables aren't to laud us on the work we have done, but rather to ask us to take a look at what we are doing or not doing.

Being the king is an interesting and challenging place to put ourselves as members of a church – a place where we think of ourselves as welcoming to all. How do we treat those who turn down our invitation? When the invited don't come, do we go out into the main street and invite whomever we see? Then do we turn away those without the right garment? I can think of times in my life when I have been like the king.

What do you do with family members who you have invited to church a thousand times who always make some excuse? Do you cut them off? Do you think less of them? Maybe you simply stop saying anything about God to them ... ever.

Who do you invite to church or to the pantry or to bible study? Anyone you see? Or do you choose carefully. Not that person. I'm not sure I want them at my church.

And when it comes to putting out the person without the wedding garment, I think of all the times I have been tempted to do that especially when it comes to the helping ministries many churches do.

I was talking to a woman this week who has done a lot of work with the homeless. One of the ministries of her church in New York is to distribute food along with hats and gloves in the winter. She described one woman who they were pretty sure was wealthy, but who always wanted hats and gloves. She said that when she began volunteering for this ministry, she was told that they gave to everyone – no questions asked and that whoever came to them had a need. They – the volunteers - just might not know what that need was. And so, they gave hats and gloves to the woman who probably didn't need them. They didn't say she didn't belong a.k.a. not wearing the right wedding garment. They gave and she received whether she actually needed a hat and gloves, or human interaction or simply to belong.

This welcome table God prepares for us is for all and we have to work hard to be part of that welcome for all. Many times we will not get it right, but we must be attentive.

As we approach this election with so much uncertainty and so much division, I wonder if this parable has something to say to us. Who has ignored your invitation to come over to your side? And what do you do when that happens? What do you do when they tear you down for your beliefs? Do you cast them out into darkness? How do you still extend God's welcome when in your opinion they are wearing the wrong garment whether it be their t-shirt or the sign in front of their house?

Yup this is tough stuff. But Jesus asks us to be in the tough stuff and to welcome people to the kingdom of God. Politics will pass away. Riches do not last. Status symbols are here today and gone tomorrow. In the end, it is God and the welcome table to which all are invited. Knowing this, how can we extend God's welcome to those we meet in our actions and in our words? It is a tall order to be sure. However, we are called to be God's hands at work in the world and our attentiveness to practicing God's generous and loving welcome is what helps manifest God's kingdom in our world.