

The King's Banquet

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 22:1-14

I want to put us in this parable. I want to put us in the parable and imagine ourselves as guests at the king's wedding banquet, right before the moment of confrontation with the improperly dressed guest. I want us to get a sense of the mood at that moment.

So there we are in the king's wedding hall. The place is packed. It's a swirl of cheerful people. The room is full of music and color and conversation. Everyone is good spirits. The royal musicians are playing something jazzy. People of all shapes and sizes are on the dance floor. We're all talking to each other between mouthfuls of fatted calf and the best wine we've ever tasted. "Oh my goodness can you believe it. We're in the king's palace." "Have you tried the duck? It's fantastic! Have you seen the hors d'oeuvres table? Unbelievable! Man! What did we do to deserve this!? How did we end up at the king's wedding party! Let's hear it for the king!" We all raise our glasses and sing: "For he's a jolly good fellow!"

Not only are we all happy; we look good. We have never looked this good. Because, as we arrived at the party, we were given a gift. We all got a new set of clothes. Beautiful stuff! Designer stuff! A clean white robe and all the accessories, compliments of the king. We couldn't possibly have afforded clothes like this on our own, nor could we ever have made them ourselves; this is royal craftsmanship we're talking about. It was more than we could have asked or imagined. All of us dressed like royalty, laughing and talking, basking in the gracious hospitality of the king.

One of the things that everyone is talking about is how we ended up on the invite list in the first place. The king had originally invited a more conventional crew. The first guest list had included the gentry of the land. Lords and ladies, dukes and duchesses, barons and baronets; the original invite list was a who's who of high society. It was a royal wedding after all. This was a big deal! Hundreds of people had spent months preparing. Flowers had been planted. The palace had been redecorated. Photographers had been hired. The menu, the music, the guest list; all of it planned to the last detail. And the guests had been already given notice of the date. As was the custom of that land, all the people on the original guest list were told about the party ahead of time, and all had agreed to come. The arrangement had been that the king and his servants would get everything ready and in place, and when everything was ready a servant would go out and announce that things were in place: "Come then for all is ready!" Come to the great wedding supper of the King!"

But when the king's servants had gone out, all those privileged people on the first guest list would not come. In the king's banquet hall, there sat the table with all the little cards on it. The names of the guests written in neat hand writing, their table number in the corner, all the cards laid out in neat rows, but not one card was taken. Centerpieces bloomed on the banquet tables. The caterers stood like sentries over steaming heaps of fatted calf and oxen in wine sauce. But there were no guests. Not one came. How embarrassing for the king!

The king had been even tempered about it though. He was gracious, slow to anger. He gave the guests the benefit of the doubt and sent his servants out again. "Please! Come! All is ready" But this time the servants weren't just ignored, they were mocked, and some of them stumbled back to the palace with beatings they'd been given, some of them were even killed. Well, that was enough for the king. His anger burned and fearful things happened. This time he sent out soldiers instead of servants and in his anger he leveled the baron's castles, he burned the palaces of the dukes. "A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life," says Proverbs 20. The black smoke rising on the horizon was a testament to the terrible truth of that proverb.

But then, out of his anger, and out of the mess, something unexpected and wonderful. A new guest list. The servants go out again and this time everyone is invited. The kids on their skateboards down at the skate park "C'mon down!", the people in the lunch line at the homeless shelter "C'mon down."; the cart boys at Walmart, "You're invited!" The prison work crew cleaning garbage off the interstate, "Hey bring a friend." Everyone, the good and the bad, were invited to share the wedding feast. And that's how we got to be on the king's party list.

So there we all are, laughing dancing and looking good. Feeling nothing but fine. But then all of a sudden the king's voice booms out across the dining hall, and his voice has an edge to it. "SIR! EXCUSE ME SIR!" The band makes a noise like a needle coming off a record and stops playing. The dancing stops. The conversation ceases. There is a terrible silence as all of us stand with our drinks in our hands and turn to see what's happening. "Excuse me Friend!" booms the king, "How did you get in here without a wedding gown!"

There in the corner is a man who is not in the spirit of the party. He had taken off his robe, he'd put it in his backpack with plans to have it appraised, now he was over by the Hors d'oeuvres table stuffing pastries in his pocket. "Friend! What are you doing to my party!" The man is caught red handed, sullen. He offers no apology. The servants come. They seize him, roughly. They bind him hand and foot. Then three of the strongest servants pick the man up, they carry him to the front door, and, while he struggles, they throw him into the outer darkness where his loud cry of rage and sorrow can be heard just before the door slams shut.

Wow! What a moment. My question to you the partygoer, as you stand there with your drink in hand and your cocktail weenies balanced on your plate, as you stand there in that terrible silence, my question to you is what happens to the party after that moment? Does the party just continue with the same spirit? Do you all just go back to the joyful swirl, or does something in the mood change. The music starts up again and the conversation resumes, does it have the same wild freedom or is it a little more chastened and subdued? Is everyone suddenly checking out their outfit to make sure they're wearing it properly?

And, my second question, after the man is kicked out the door, does it also change the way you look at the king? Do you sing 'for he's a jolly good fellow,' or do your songs change? I don't think there's any question that our mood would be sobered and our view of the king would be changed.

That is the question of this parable. Because that's not just what we imagine would happen if we were in the parable; that is what actually happens when we read this judgment parable today! As we sit here listening to the story 2000 years later, the same change happens in us. Our worship party grows quiet when we hear Jesus' terrible story. God is suddenly not the jolly good fellow that we thought, now he seems more awesome, more holy, more terrible. Like the partygoers, we sit here after the story and we wonder, "who is this king? Is he safe?"

So who is he? What does this story tell us about our God? How do we react to what happened at this party? Well several things here. First, and this I think this is the most obvious, it's very clear that Jesus is saying that life with the king is not party, party, party! Fun! Fun! Fun! Yes, there is joy, yes there is blessing, yes there is grace; but the grace is not cheap. Anyone can get into the party. The good and the bad are welcomed. Rotten sinners are accepted in the hall. But although we are welcomed into the king's courts as we are, the king will not let us stay just as we are. He means to transform us into something holy and better. God's deepest desire for us is not happiness; it's holiness, and holiness means learning to clothe ourselves in the king's righteousness, and learning to put on compassion and kindness and patience and over all these things to put on love. Being accepted by God's grace means learning the discipline of these clothes.

Anyone can sign up for a community hockey team, buy themselves a uniform and look like a hockey player. I can put any of you here in a set of equipment, the gloves, the stick the skates the pads, and you'd look good. But learning how to put on those clothes in the full sense, learning how to be a hockey player, learning how to skate and shoot and stickhandle, well, that's a thousands of hours of discipline. Through the grace of Jesus, anyone can come into God's courts and be clothed in him, but once you're in uniform, the practices start. The workouts. The two a day. The daily discipline. God wants us in holy shape.

Second, I think this story is written to smash our idols. This story shakes us loose from our false pictures of God. It smashes the nice comfortable pictures of God that we like to build in our mind, a God whose love is neat and tidy, and it brings us face to face with a living God whose love is real, transformative, fierce.

In an article she wrote back in 2000, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about how parables like this one work on us. She writes, "[These judgment stories] pry our fingers away from our own ideas about who God should be and how God should act... And they propel us toward the God who is." "It does no good to protect ourselves with inflatable bits of comfort and advice... Judgment, violence, rejection, death--these are present in our world and our lives. And there is some crazy kind of consolation in the fact that they are present in the Bible as well. They remind us that the Bible is not all lambs and rainbows. If it were, it would not be our book. Our book has everything in it: wonder and terror, worst fears and best hopes, both for ourselves and our relationship with

God. The best hope of all is that because the terrors are included as part of the covenant story, they may turn out to be redemptive in the end, when we see dimly no more but face to face at last.”

Then she told this story, another kind of parable about the terrible, wonderful love of God: She had been spending a summer on a barrier island in the South. She was staying in an apartment on the beach, and it was one of those beaches where Loggerhead turtles will occasionally lay their eggs. One night while the tide was out she was walking when there, crawling up the beach came one of the turtles, an enormous female. While Taylor watched the turtle laid her eggs in a nest she had dug high up on the beach.

The next morning Taylor got up and went down to the beach to see the spot where the eggs had been laid. The eggs were still there, but something was terribly wrong. The tracks of the Mother turtle did not go back to the sea where they were supposed to; they went in the opposite direction up into the heart of the dunes. By now the sun was high and the sand was hot, not the weather for a sea turtle. Taylor followed the Mother’s tracks and found her alive, but exhausted; hot and caked with sand. After pouring some water on her to relieve her, she ran off to tell a park ranger what she had found.

The park ranger came with his jeep to perform a rescue, but not the rescue she expected. He flipped the turtle on her back and then wrapped tire chains to her flippers. The other end of the tire chains was then attached to the bumper of his jeep. The Park Ranger then dragged the exhausted turtle behind his jeep, through the sand, down to the water’s edge. During the ride her body was yanked and jerked around and her neck bent so far Taylor felt sure that it would break.

When she got to the water’s edge the ranger unhooked the turtle and flipped her over. She lay motionless, half dead as the waves lapped against her. But gradually, as the tide came in and the water deepened the turtle lifted, her strength came back and she swam safely back into the sea. “Watching her swim slowly away,” wrote Taylor, “and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I reflected that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.”

This story does to us what the ranger did to that turtle. It pulls us away from the comfortable god of our own making, and pulls us back to the living God; the God who is as beautiful and terrible as the rolling sea.

All this is true, and yet, if we are honest, the man in the parable is not like the turtle. We can’t really say that when he was bound and cast out of the party he was really being saved. I would like that to be true. I want that to be true. But there is nothing in the story that tells me that. There is this in the story though. The son of the King, the same man who is telling this terrible story, will very soon find himself in an eerily similar position. The servants of different powers will seize him and bind him hand and foot. They will strip him of his clothes and force him to wear clothes of shame and mockery. They will accuse him and he will not open his mouth. They will take him and crucify him in the darkness. And he will die with a loud cry on his lips.

It is another terrible story, a fearful story. But what’s fearful about it is not what happens to us; what’s fearful about it is what happens to the king and his son, what they take on themselves for us and for our salvation. It’s a story where the king makes another spectacular offer of grace because he really wants all of us, the good and the bad, at his feast.

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