

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight oh lord our strength and redeemer

There is a wedding here at Trinity on Saturday, and while I'm not a betting woman, I think it's safe to say that that wedding on Saturday won't look anything like the one we heard about in the Gospel reading this morning. What a wedding! Anytime I meet someone in the wedding industry I ask them what's the worst wedding you've been to? Or what's the craziest thing that's happened?

But I think Jesus' parable of the Wedding takes the cake as the worst wedding ever. No one in the story was familiar with Emily Post's work on wedding etiquette.

In the parable there's a king who receives a slew of rejected invitations, and not only do they check "regretful decline" they murder the king's messengers. The king then retaliates with a military invasion, resulting in more murder and a whole city being set on fire. All the fine food that was ready and put out must have gone rancid during this time. And when the party finally got going, it was filled with a hodge podge of guests who had been pulled off the streets. And it culminated with one guest being singled out, tied up, and tortured for his failure to adhere to the dress code.

And the real kicker is, that all of this was prefaced with the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to (dot...dot..dot)" Don't you want to ask Jesus, "*How exactly can this* be compared to the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus often asked the folks listening to him if they understood what he said, and if asked I definitely would have responded. “HMMMM, say more. I’m not sure I’m tracking.”

The scholar Amy Jill Levine says that “unlike a wise proverb or a beautiful promise, parables are stories that are *meant* to be weird”

They’re meant to make us go “wait what did he just say?” They make unexpected turns for the purpose of expanding our imaginations as to how God works.’ They require us to lean in and get curious.

And I spent most of this week squinting at this text, rereading it, tilting my head, turning it upside down, waiting for my imagination to be expanded, looking for the kingdom of God in a really violent story.

Often when we step up to a parable, we begin by reading it allegorically by plugging God, Jesus, and ourselves into certain roles to make sense out of what’s happening. And at first blush it makes sense to plug God in for the king, Jesus for the banquet’s groom, the Old Testament prophets as the murdered deliverers of God’s invitation to God’s people. And in reading the parable in that way we might gather that this parable serves as a warning to accept the invitation to the banquet of salvation. To get ready to attend. To put on the right clothes, to cloth ourselves in righteousness, so that we don’t find ourselves tied, tortured, and thrown out into the darkness at the end of the party.

But at the same time, reading the parable as an allegory in this way means glossing over quite a few details. Like how the king sought revenge and retaliated against those who refused his invitation. The king held the whole city accountable for the deeds of some, he burned it all down. Which resulted in the death and destruction of not only those who refused him, but also those who were innocent and unaware. Then the king invited those off the streets, the people standing traumatized in the midst of their city's destruction, the good and the bad. He didn't care who was in the room, just that the room be filled. And then when he noticed someone sticking out, someone underdressed, he sent them out to be tortured.

If God is the king in this parable how might this be compared to the kingdom of heaven? Are we to conclude that God is vengeful and violent? Because we know that Jesus said to forgive, to forgive abundantly, to love one's enemies, to turn and offer the other cheek when wronged. And are we to conclude that God cares about clothes? When Jesus himself said a few chapters earlier in the Sermon on the Mount "Why do you worry about clothes? "God clothes the grasses of the field with lilies; will he not much more clothe you?"

If the kingdom of heaven could be compared in likeness to something out of Game of Thrones; where a vengeful and fashion-conscious King, murders, burns, hosts a party with spoiled food, and all of it ending with the torture of an outcast, if this is the kingdom of heaven, it might be time we reconsider our Sunday morning activities!

But don't make alternative plans for next Sunday, just yet.

For what makes Jesus' parables so powerful is that they are endless sources of meaning... but we have to be willing to keep tilting our heads in different directions to see them anew. To remain curious.

And if we tilt our heads another way, we find yet another way to read this parable. For I don't believe Jesus is saying the kingdom of heaven **is like** the king in this parable – he says it can be compared to this king. And “Comparing always involves contrasting”¹. The king described in this parable is a very earthly king, a despot, a ruthless dictator, not unlike King Herod. But if we compare him, or contrast him, to another, to the man who refuses to bow down to the whims of those in power, who refuses to put on the wedding clothes and go along with the festivities when there is so much suffering out in the streets, who is speechless in response to the King, and then is bound and thrown out into the darkness to suffer. If we take another look at that man, we have different story.

What happens to *that man* in the parable, the man who was silent, bound, and then thrown out. What happens to *that man* is what is *about* to happen to Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' silence before his accusers more than any other Gospel. For just a few days after the telling of this parable to the religious and political leaders in the temple, Jesus would stand before

¹ Rev. Julie Morris. The Banquet. Church of the Epiphany 10/15/17

them, speechless, and then he would be bound, stripped of his clothes, and nailed to a cross where he would weep and gnash his teeth.

“Perhaps, if we want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus is telling us—don’t look to the rage-filled, violent and vengeful king with an army at his side –that is the kingdom of this world – there is nothing new there; instead look at the unarmed, speechless man who is bound and cast out into the darkness. In other words, Jesus is saying, ‘If you want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like - look at me. Learn from me.’”²

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus speaks on the kingdom of heaven and he says, “The kingdom of heaven *suffers* violence, and the violent bear it away” (Matt 11:12). Human, earthly kingdoms operate by threat and force; they dish out violence. But Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is about suffering the violence instead of dishing it out. The kingdom of heaven holds to the power of love and forgiveness as the greatest powers on earth not might.

The kingdom of heaven, that *suffers* violence, is represented in this parable not through the figure of the king who dishes it out, but in the lone figure at the end who takes it upon himself like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:

² Rev. Julie Morris

Also leaned a lot on Marty Aiken, “[The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence: Discerning the Suffering Servant in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet](#)” (given at the 2003 COV&R Conference in Innsbruck, Austria).

Isaiah says “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)”

When compared to the kingdoms of the world, the kingdom of heaven looks like that, like a man who silently offered himself. Who stood against the evil, violent ways of the empire, on behalf of others.

The God that we worship, the God we see in Jesus Christ is not a powerful king, but a servant. Jesus didn't kill his enemies and burn their cities; he was killed by his enemies for refusing to go along with them.

And every single week, we gather around this banquet, where no one is required to come, but all are invited. Where you don't have to be wearing the right robes or even have the right attitude to attend.

For this is the banquet of Jesus who loves and forgives; it is the banquet of God who intends to wipe the tears from every face and swallow up death forever. Come as you are to *this* banquet. The banquet of the kingdom of heaven. Come and celebrate the victory of God's kingdom; the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit, amen