

Good morning!

Recently we have heard many parables from the gospel of Matthew. We have heard from Jesus in his parables on the unforgiving servant, the laborers in the vineyard, the two sons and the wicked tenants. We have learned that we are to continually forgive, that God's economics are much different than our own, and that prostitutes and tax collectors are getting into heaven before the religious authorities. In today's sermon we will hear from Jesus as he continues with his one of his lessons, this time about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Listen now as we hear the word of the Lord....

Scripture Reading Matthew 22:1-14

Once 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 Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

When I first read this passage about a month ago when Jill asked me to preach I thought it was a set-up. Jesus’ lesson is not easy in this text, and I thought that as the intern I was getting stuck with the short end of the stick. I imagined Jill sitting there at her retreat

center outlining sermons and planning for the next few months. She is reading through the lectionary until she gets to this passage and says to herself, with a mischievous smile, “I’ll just have the intern preach on that text,” but we’ve heard the parables that Jill has preached on the last few weeks, and they weren’t easier than this one. Like many of the other parables we’ve learned about, this one made me nervous. Jesus is telling the religious leaders for the third time that others will get into heaven before them or instead of them. And here I am making my attempt at religious leadership and trying to explain what Jesus has to say to us. The leaders have devoted their entire life to the work of the church just to be told by Jesus that a tax collector will get into heaven ahead of them.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who threw a wedding banquet for his son. So God is throwing a huge party for Jesus the Son, or maybe that’s taking the metaphor a little far. There is a VIP guest list and only the best of the best are invited. It’s time for the party and the messengers are sent out to gather the guests. These important guests refuse to come to the banquet. The first question I ask is why? What would cause someone to refuse an invitation to a prestigious party? Maybe they have something else to attend to or

they don't know who else will be there maybe they don't like one of the other guests that has been invited. So it was easier to pretend that the invitation was not received than to face a person they did not want to see. Maybe they don't know what will be served at the banquet so they don't want to go.

This party was so important and the king really wanted these special guests in attendance, so once again he sends out the slaves to invite the people. This time the invitation comes with a menu, and it is the best the king has to offer. Surely they won't refuse now. The king has gone out of his way to make sure these guests know what to expect. They have not received one, but two invitations complete with a delicious menu, as good as our Wednesday night suppers! Those invited now not only don't attend the banquet, or gratefully refuse. They go so far as to make light of the invitation. They make the mistake of not taking the king seriously. Some went back to life as usual, working the farm or tending to business. And we can understand this response because we know what it is like to get caught up in the things of daily life, and sometimes they are just too hard to walk away from. But we struggle to understand why the people

would go so far as to kill the slaves. Did they see the slaves as an annoyance and it was easier to kill them than to just walk away?

But this rejection and refusal of the invitation along with the mistreatment of the slaves cause the king to be enraged. This part of the text was troubling for me because we usually think of God in the New Testament as gracious and forgiving, kind and loving, but this story gives a glimpse of God from the Old Testament. Christians typically don't like an angry God; we much prefer to focus on the sovereignty of God or how God is ultimately in control and is swayed to anger because of the silly actions of us humans. But really that isn't giving God enough credit, God knows us and loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. And we all know relationships aren't always easy, and we sometimes hurt those we are in relationship with, and we get angry, so really it makes sense that God gets angry. Just imagine how you feel when someone rejects an invitation that you provide, and now imagine how God would feel we many refuse the invitation to come to the greatest party ever.

But through the anger and violent response to the people, the king realizes that celebration must go on. It can't be cancelled. So the king overcomes his anger with an outpouring of kindness and invites

anyone off the street who is willing to come to the banquet. And the guests start flowing in the doors; they fill the wedding hall to capacity. The king couldn't be more pleased. He looks around the room, but then he sees him, that one guy who came to the party but didn't take the time to change into his wedding clothes. It wasn't like he had to spend two days getting ready; he could have at least put on a clean shirt. It is easy to criticize to this man that didn't bother to prepare for the kingdom, but how often do we think that we are already "dressed appropriately" for what is to come?

But isn't it so much easier to worry about how everyone else is dressed? Our tendency to be more concerned with others' preparation for the kingdom reminds of a short story by Flannery O'Connor entitled 'Revelation'. In this story the image of the lower society folks, tax collectors and prostitutes, getting into heaven ahead of the religious authorities and nobles is apparent. The main character is Ruby Turpin, a very heavy-set woman. It begins with Mrs. Turpin entering a crowded waiting room at a doctor's office accompanied by her husband Claude, who takes the last empty seat in the room. Almost immediately, Mrs. Turpin begins surveying the room and assessing the others seated around her. In her head, she labels each person: a

pleasant woman, her daughter (an ugly girl with bad acne), a white trash woman and her sleeping son, and an old woman (the white trash's mother). She identifies everyone in the room according to the status and value she thinks that they have.

Mrs. Turpin strikes up a conversation with the pleasant woman about the importance of being refined and having a good disposition. They also talk about being grateful and how it is important to be thankful for the good things you have been given in life. The entire time they are conversing, the white trash woman repeatedly interjects comments that show her ignorance and lack of intelligence. The pleasant woman's daughter, Mary Grace, a fat ugly girl with bad skin, scowls at Mrs. Turpin and seems to grow angry during the course of the conversation.

All at once, Mary Grace hurls the book she is reading at Mrs. Turpin and lunges at her throat. The book, ironically titled *Human Development*, strikes Mrs. Turpin above her eye. The girl is subdued by the doctor and nurse who call an ambulance to come and take the girl away. Before she leaves, she whispers a powerful message to Mrs. Turpin. Just loud enough for her to hear, Mary Grace says, "Go back to hell where you belong, you old wart hog." Mrs. Turpin finds this

comment very unsettling, and she wonders if it may have been a message from God, who may be trying to intervene in her life. Still anxious, she returns home. While working on her farm she questions God aloud. As she contemplates the "message" he has sent her, she has a vision of the souls of the characters from the waiting room walking up to Heaven and her soul last of all.

Her revelation is what is feared most, that all the people she thought of as less worthy than herself were walking into heaven ahead of her. We don't have to be like Mrs. Turpin though. We can receive the invitation that God has extended to us, RSVP and let God know that we are coming to the party, and then make the preparations that are necessary before we arrive. We also have to be aware that much like the people in the parable there are consequences for whatever decision we make in regard to God's invitation.

So what I really want you to remember is the challenge that Jesus gave to the religious authorities by reminding them that the invitation from God is not a given. It requires a RSVP, and even a change of clothes. God has extended the invitation, so let's get ready for the party!

To the glory of God. Amen.