

October 11, 2020  
New Song Episcopal Church  
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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

## **Many are called, but few are chosen**

I've struggled with this parable. Today's sermon is about those struggles.

The parable starts off okay with a king wanting to give a wedding banquet for his son. Cool. I'm immediately taken aback with "sent his slaves," which the Bible translations I read as a kid always translated as "servants" (that's the King James Version and the New International Version, for those interested). But, today we read "slaves" so that's what I'm going to start with.

I've never been comfortable with the ease in which the Bible talks about slaves, slavery, and so on, and this is just one of many passages that include it. Many of those passages can't so easily be softened with other words like "servants."

I understand the idea of reading things within the context of the time in which those things were written. I also know that there are still slaves in our world today. It's a painful reality that throughout most of human history people have owned other people as property.

Slavery is a (in my opinion) far too common metaphor in the Bible for the relationship between God and God's followers. We are to act as though we do not own ourselves, but rather we are owned. We are to live for God's purposes, not our own. I get it, and there's merit in the ultimate idea of releasing our desires, many of which are ultimately harmful to us and others, and learning to live a different way. I still don't like the slave thing.

Additionally, slavery makes a convenient metaphor for the idea of redemption throughout the New Testament. I don't like that, but the Apostle Paul's letters are filled

with the idea and even the Gospel of Luke (chapter 21) talks about lifting up our heads because our redemption is drawing near.

But the question I struggle with is how anyone at any time could be okay with the idea that some people are less than others, that it is somehow okay to own other people because they are not worthy of being free. I'm not okay with that.

This Gospel reading does nothing to help answer my struggle. So, now that I've acknowledged that struggle I'm going to move on, because in the parable slavery is simply a fact and not an issue being discussed. The king sent his slaves to do his bidding. No one listening would have batted an eye, so we will now proceed to read past that and try to find the intended meaning.

The king wanted many people to attend his son's wedding banquet. He wanted his son to be honored, seen, acclaimed. This is the son of a king and it sounds like quite the feast.

But, the invitees are not interested. The slaves sent carrying the invitation are mocked and scorned. They are mistreated. They are killed.

Of course the king was angry, the listening crowd would have responded as Jesus continued his parable. Of course the king sent troops to destroy the murders and even their city. (Not okay with the destruction of the city thing, either, but again, it's not the main point and everyone listening would have taken it as an obvious way for a scorned king to deal with what happened.)

In today's reading from Isaiah the Lord is praised for making the city of the enemy into a heap, a ruin, "the palace of aliens is a city no more" that will never be rebuilt.

There are some horrible people in the world, indeed throughout human history. From the standpoint of justice, perhaps some truly have and do deserve annihilation. That doesn't mean I'm comfortable with it.

The king wants his son to be honored. The original invitees refused to come celebrate the son's wedding at the feast and are likely dead now.

The king tells his slaves to bring in anyone who will come because "those invited were not worthy."

This passage has been abused for centuries. Some have wrongly used it to persecute Jews, saying that Jesus was referring to those who rejected him as Messiah. Others have used it as an excuse to hunt down and destroy ethnic groups, LGBTQ people, atheists, scientists who dare to proclaim that the earth revolves around the sun, and the list goes on.

Let me state emphatically and clearly that Jesus's parable here does not give anyone the right to declare anyone else "not worthy."

Again, I am troubled while reading and meditating on this passage.

The slaves go out as they are told and bring in all they find, "both good and bad." And the wedding hall was filled.

The king should be happy. His son is being "properly" honored now with a full house for the wedding feast.

Then, in the middle of the festivities, the king comes in to see the guests.

Wait, he wasn't already there for the feast? I'm gonna skip over that, too. Maybe I missed something cultural that would make this another "normal" thing that the parable listeners would have glossed over as expected.

Okay, the king comes in, and immediately focuses on the one person he deems unworthy, because the guest is not wearing a wedding robe. He commands that the guest be bound hand and foot and cast "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Man, this makes me uncomfortable. I'm all about grace and love and acceptance.

Forgiveness. Redemption (still uncomfortable with parts of that redemption metaphor, but the ultimate idea is beautiful).

Many are called, but few are chosen.

Okay, Aesop, the moral of this tale is a bit obscure. The piece of art Linda showed us at the beginning of the service shows what I think when I read “gathered all whom they found.” How are any of those shown going to own “proper” wedding robes??

Here’s where I ended up this week. It seems obvious to me that Jesus is trying to draw a picture of some aspect of the Kingdom of God. But what I hear and read feels dangerous and ugly to me. This is not the beauty I was expecting.

Then, I start seeing something.

The king invites people. They were called. They refused the call. The parable doesn’t say that refusing the call was a fatal act, but rather that the murderers were destroyed. Okay, along with their city...I don’t know, maybe he’s implying that the inhabitants of cities where slaves were murdered were all culpable for not standing up and saving the slaves?? Anyway, it was glossed over in the original, but what was emphasized was that it was the act of murder that brought severe judgement, not the act of refusing an invitation. I feel like that is important.

When the original invitees refused the invitation, others were invited, indeed everyone was invited. This feels right. They come.

At least one comes without actually honoring the host (according to the host’s expectations) and is cast out.

One option I see for making sense of this parable is that all humans are called. God is interested in all of us and intends good, not harm. We are free to reject that call. Those who reject the call with violence, well, something bad is going to happen. Again, even the unexpected are invited, called. All are welcome.

I think pairing the reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians with this Gospel is interesting, because that passage gives us a spiritual practice to follow. Think on true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praise-worthy things. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Be thankful as you pray and God will give you peace, peace beyond human understanding.

We are all welcome, but there is an expectation of earnestness. An expectation of honesty in ourselves as we follow. We don't have to be perfect, but we have to do something. We have to be active in following the call. It is our responsibility to seek out the things that clothe us properly. Perhaps that is how we are chosen.

Amen.

## **Old Testament**

### **Isaiah 25:1-9**

O LORD, you are my God;  
I will exalt you, I will praise your name;  
for you have done wonderful things,  
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.  
For you have made the city a heap,  
the fortified city a ruin;  
the palace of aliens is a city no more,  
it will never be rebuilt.  
Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;  
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.  
For you have been a refuge to the poor,  
a refuge to the needy in their distress,  
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.  
When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,  
the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,  
you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;  
the song of the ruthless was stilled.  
On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,

of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

## **The Response**

### **Psalm 23**

#### *Dominus regit me*

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; \*  
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures \*  
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul \*  
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil; \*  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

## **The Epistle**

### **Philippians 4:1-9**

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

## **The Gospel**

### **Matthew 22:1-14**

Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again 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.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then 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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”