

The Uninvited Guest

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, October 15th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus' parables often confuse me but I confess that they never fail to excite me when I open myself to them. I find it a little more than amazing that after just about 50 years of preaching there is something left to be learned and said about their content.

The Wedding Feast story is an example of what I mean. This parable appears also in Luke's gospel. Scholars tell us that Luke's parable predates Matthew's and it's easy to see that it differs from Matthew's account of the parable.

Our gospel lesson today is Matthew's version: a convoluted mess in comparison with Luke's. Can there be any sense made of it in today's world? Allow me to try!

In its present form it is about a King who held a wedding banquet, but his guests not only refused to come, they beat up and murdered his messengers, whereupon the King laid siege to the land slaughtering peasants and burning "their" entire city (presumably also his own). Following the carnage, a somewhat more genteel King then invites "everybody" to come, "both good and bad" to fill the hall. But when he happens to notice that one of those innocent guests who came at his last minute invitation, with no notice and no requirement to dress appropriately, he bound the poor schlep hand and foot, and then threw him into the outer darkness to cry and grind his teeth. This is the Good News of the Lord?" This sounds like ethnic cleansing to me!

Last week, the parable at hand indicted the religious leaders for failing to heed the prophets and for killing the legal heir and son of the vineyard owner. It ended with the ominous prediction – cleverly placed in the mouth of the religious leaders – that God would give the vineyard to new tenants and crush the wicked ones. This week, the implicit retributive violence of the story becomes explicit, as Matthew takes up a parable also known to Luke.

On the whole, Matthew's version is very dark, more violent, and pushes even the typical parable's tolerance for absurdity to the edge. Why? Fred Craddock notes, "Matthew knew how easily grace can melt into permissiveness," and suggests that Matthew was perhaps "addressing a church that had lost the distinction between accepting all persons and condoning all behavior".

Because at this point in the family conflict, he is willing to say that God not only rejects those cousins and kin that rejected Jesus but also actually sent the Romans to destroy the Temple as punishment (a conclusion not uncommon to Matthew, but intensified in this parable).

This is painful stuff, and we'd best not ignore it and for a very good reason. Because this parable has been used across the centuries – and still by some Christians today – to drive a wedge between Jews and Christians, Muslims and Christians, and even to justify Christian mistreatment of those of other colour and faith communities unlike our own. All of which is laced with a not so veiled racism. Enough is enough.

I don't think it's enough to put the parable in its context and leave it alone. We might not be satisfied with Matthew's response to the questions he and his community faced about rejection and disappointment when not all believed as they did, but what about us? I think that's a growing question for our middleclass, modern United Church Protestantism, and it has to do with how are we to respond as we observe more of our family, friends and neighbours choosing not to attend church or marry persons of a different faith or no faith whatsoever. So what do we do when it comes to those

who do not respond to the invitation of the king? Do we imagine or hope that this king will invite them again but if they refuse destroy them?

This analogy isn't perfect, I realize, as Matthew is speaking particularly to the religious leaders of his day and drawing on a long tradition in the Scriptures of God holding such leaders to a particularly high standard of fidelity, but I think it still applies to some degree. In short, the question before us is what do we do when people don't believe as we do? If we don't agree with Matthew's way of resolving these difficult matters and feelings, then what response do we make?

I think we often feel trapped between two choices: to either condemn those who believe differently (or don't believe at all) or feel like we are somehow being unfaithful by not condemning them. That is Matthew's dilemma and it was of his own making. But keep in mind, *we are not Matthew's community*; that is, we are not the minority tradition with little cultural power trying to make sense of our rejection and alienation.

I suggest a third option. We are Christians who see, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, not only just how far God will go to make this invitation of grace but also and that God's words of love and forgiveness are more powerful than any words of punishment, hate, or fear.

Because we have seen and heard and experienced first-hand God's love, we do not have to call down God's judgment but can trust the God we know in Jesus to care for those who do not respond to God's invitation just as graciously as God has cared for us. We can, to borrow the words Paul writes in today's second reading, "not worry about anything" – including when our loved ones don't believe as we do – but "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [our] requests be made known to God," trusting that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus."

If we can practice trusting God enough to resist condemnation but instead open ourselves, our minds and spirits, our hearts, to those who we share a common humanity, we might find ourselves more capable of sharing *why what* we believe is important to us (rather than just insisting *that* believing just like us is what matters). We might respect the questions, beliefs, and struggles of those we welcome to our land those of different dress, language, culture and religion. And we might offer our care and support in the name and example of the one who died rather than condemn and was raised to offer peace rather than retribution. And this patient understanding and loving support, as it turns out, may just be the most powerful witness we can offer.

This is hard stuff to digest, but I'm pretty sure I've never read anywhere in Scripture where being faithful to our God was supposed to be easy. Easy or hard it remains the Word of The Lord! *Amen.*