

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 10.11.20

Isaiah 25:6-10/

Philippians 4:12-14,19-20/Matthew 22:1-14

DRESSED AND READY TO GO TO THE BANQUET?... OR NOT?

How have you come dressed for this feast? Are you still in your pajamas? Did you go out running beforehand and you're still in your sweaty clothes? Did you put on a nice top over your shorts or sweats just to look presentable? Regardless, I'm sure you've been in a situation where what you wore and what was deemed appropriate clashed, like in my first job out of my M.A. program, teaching religion at Immaculata High School in Leavenworth, KS. I thought all the faculty would wear costumes for Halloween, and I dressed as a witch.



It caused an uproar in my classroom as students laughed and cried that it was no different than usual, as I really was a witch. The principal came. It was humiliating, to say the least.

Today's parable has a surprising element that makes us wonder. We can accept that the first invitees didn't come, although we might wonder why they felt it necessary to kill the messengers, and that the King responded with rage and violence. But when the king invites everyone in from off the street, and then throws out the one person who isn't dressed properly, don't

you wonder? He was just off the street! How could he be dressed? Made me wonder...

So I backed up to see the context. This context is twofold, as I see it:

- the circumstances of the community Matthew is addressing in his gospel, and
- the placement of this parable within the gospel of Matthew, how it fits in his story line

Regarding the first: the book of Matthew was probably written between 75 and 100 C.E. in a fairly well-to-do urban community of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. The majority are Jewish, still faithful to the Jewish law, who see Jesus as the fulfillment of their Jewish heritage, but there are Gentile Christians as well. They have lived through the terrors of the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in the early 70s.



There is evidence of a sharp conflict between Jewish Christians and the rabbinic leadership of post-70s Jerusalem. Matthew's gospel is written at this time of transition in the early church, when people were concerned about the connection to their Jewish roots and anxious about the future of the Gentile mission. Christianity had begun a wrenching separation from the rest of Judaism, which included persecution and martyrdom. This context can help explain the violence that disturbed me in this parable.

The second: This parable in Matthew 22 hangs together with what has gone before. For the last three weeks we

have listened to three parables addressed to the same audience, the chief priests and elders. Reading these 3 parables in light of what came before opened things up for me. The previous chapter, Matthew 21, starts with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, what we celebrate on Palm Sunday, the crowds and the children shouting *“Hosanna to the Son of David!”* Jesus then goes into the Temple, drives out the money-changers and the dove-sellers, and brings in the blind and lame to heal them. This latter would have been seen as problematic, as the blind and lame are physically blemished and thus forbidden from entry into the Temple.



The chief priests are indignant. This Jesus is not following the rules—letting in the impure, not shutting the children up who keep hollering, *“Hosanna to the son of David!”* Two starkly painted pictures: the acclaim of the people and the reproach of the elders. The next day, hungry, Jesus looks to a fig tree for some fruit, but only finds leaves. He proclaimed, *“Never again shall you produce fruit”* and it withered up instantly. That fig tree is an object lesson in what Jesus is finding with the Jewish elders. A fig tree is supposed to bear fruit. But this one doesn’t, so Jesus curses it for being all show, looking healthy, but really, it’s just a hypocritical fig tree.

In the next episode, Jesus enters the temple to teach again, and the chief priests demand to know, *“By what authority are you doing this? Who gave you the power?”*

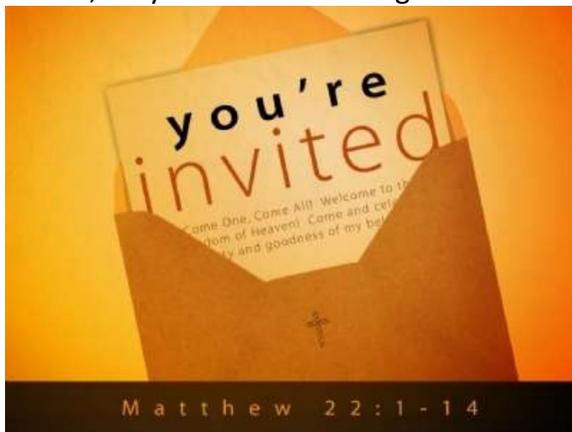
It’s like, they see his authority, it is obvious that he has it, he heals, he teaches, he commands and the tree withers, and yet they want to argue with him about it, because his authority is not sanctioned by them, he doesn’t belong to their ranks. But Jesus turns their question back at them, *“Who gave John the authority to baptize? God or humans?”* But they can’t or won’t answer. They say “we don’t know”, but really, they see a trap. They think they know, but, If they say, God, then Jesus can ask why they didn’t get baptized then. If they say human, the people will be upset, because they saw John as a prophet. So because the elders refuse to answer, Jesus likewise refuses. The elders have hedged their bets. They are the “bet-hedgers.”

And then, we get the three parables about bet-hedgers. The first, the father who asks his sons to do some work in the vineyard. The one says, “yes” but then never goes; the second says, “no”, but then repents and takes care of it. The second, the tenants of the vineyard who beat the owner’s messengers and killed his son, thinking then that they will inherit the entire vineyard. And today, the wedding feast to which the original invitees failed to show. Just before today’s parable starts, Matthew indicates that the chief priests and Pharisees heard the first two parables and realized Jesus was speaking about them!

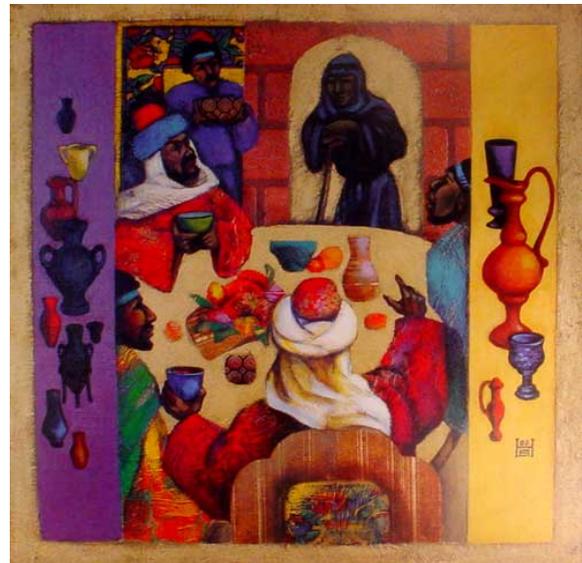


These were dangerous stories for Jesus to tell, because it made them stop hedging their bets and determine to have Jesus arrested.

I feel the bind in which Jesus was placed; I know what it is like to have your authority questioned and your ministry rejected. I feel the sadness and anger Jesus might have expressed in this parable. He was stymied in his call to teach, to heal, to create a new order where all would eat together on the Holy Mountain we saw depicted in Isaiah, where all, the destitute and the rich, the common people and the Jewish elites, would share in a feast together. The Jewish elites refused to cooperate: just like the ones who refused to attend the wedding feast, some passively ignoring the invitation, going about their business, while others actively laid hold of the servants and killed them! This story had to end in violence! Jesus had found a fissure point, pounded the stake into it, and out flew the rage and the plot to trap Jesus, at first in speech, and then to arrest and kill him, it hurtled Jesus all the way to Calvary. There is such pain in this story, of a king celebrating his son's marriage, slapped in the face with, "We're not coming!" and then thinking, maybe they'll change their minds, like the second son who repented, but no, they killed the messengers.



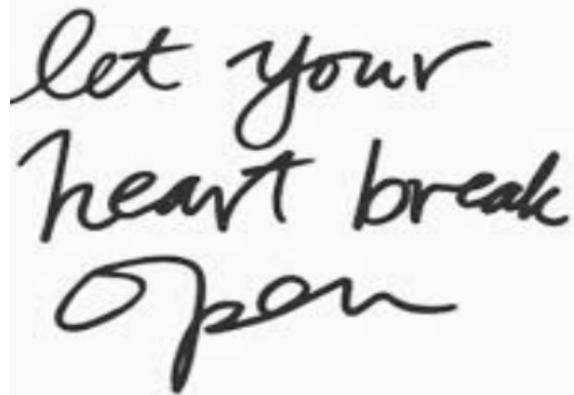
And so, the party is opened to everyone on the streets, the good and the bad, the impure and the pure, like Jesus who ate with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. And yet, just when you think you understand the story, there appears the man not dressed properly. What on earth is that about? His saying nothing, is that like the elders who won't say where John got his authority from? Is he hedging his bets? Or, as one commentator suggested, is he a stand-in for Jesus, silent before Pilate, bound hand and foot and taken outside of the city to Golgotha? The elders certainly saw Jesus as acting/dressing improperly by letting the blind and lame into the Temple, eating with sinners, twisting their words against themselves.



Or, thinking of the situation of Matthew's community, if the elders were the guests who didn't show, and the Christians the ones who did, might it be that some of the Christians were smug, thinking that since they accepted Jesus that they had nothing more to do, they belonged to the kingdom because they shared in the banquet? They had said yes, they came to the feast, but, did they do the work? The deeds of the kingdom?

Matthew might have been trying to tell his community: just because you share in the feast, you've been baptized, doesn't mean you've made it. You can still get thrown out. And there we are, we too can get smug, *I'm Catholic or I go to the Zoom Church every Sunday, or I'm pro-life or I'm antiracist...whatever!*

What do you think? Is the stake driven into your own heart, like it is mine? This is the main point: Will we let Jesus see into our hearts, break them wide open, past debates of authority or not, past defenses of who was right and who was wrong, past the traps and barbed words, past the hedging of bets, and broken, will we come to the feast, dressed and ready to do the work of the kingdom? The invitation stands.

A handwritten note in black ink on a light background. The text is written in a cursive, lowercase font and reads "let your heart break open" across three lines.

Mary Beth Lamb