

Sermon for Sunday, October 15, 2017 - "Compared to What?"

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

So, this parable raises a few questions for me. Anyone else a little troubled by it? We're not alone. Many scholars wonder what Jesus means when he says the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who acts this way. Is Jesus saying God is a vengeful king who sends troops to destroy those who won't come to a banquet? That God burns a whole city because some won't come? That God orders someone to be tortured for not wearing the right attire? I'm not sure I want to be at that banquet.

I long to be at the banquet described in our Isaiah reading, the feast God will make for all peoples in God's promised future. An abundance of joy, nourishment and life for **all** peoples, **all** nations, **all** the earth - that's a feast I want to attend. But a banquet with an angry king at which others die before I can get in? I'm not so sure.

Jesus tells this parable when responding to the Jewish religious leaders who have challenged his authority. The traditional interpretation is that Jesus is telling those leaders that they are the ones who refuse to attend the banquet; they are like the man who refused to wear a wedding robe - who refused to be clothed in God's righteousness. And further, that Jesus is saying anyone who doesn't respond to God's invitation, who refuses to be clothed in righteousness, is condemned to hell.

As Christians separated from their Jewish roots they started thinking that all Jews, not just the leaders but all Jews, were the invited guests who refused; whereas Christians were the ones who got to go into heaven. Good news for us, not for anyone else. According to this interpretation, the moral of the story is: "When God calls, go! Put on God's righteousness and you'll go to heaven. If not, watch out, you'll go to hell."

Yet, parables are not little morality tales in which there is a neat and tidy lesson. And we should always be suspect of interpretations that tell us we're OK and everyone else is not. Parables are meant to disrupt our easy answers and challenge our certainties. As New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine points out, "If we hear the parable of the wedding banquet and are not disturbed, there is something seriously amiss with our moral compass ... It would be better if we perhaps started by seeing the parable not as about

heaven or hell or final judgment, but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. If we do, we might be getting closer to Jesus.”

After all, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who...”. In most of his parables about God’s kingdom, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”. So maybe Jesus is comparing and contrasting the kingdom of heaven with how the world works. One clarification - when Matthew says “the kingdom of heaven” he isn’t talking about a place we go when we die. He is talking about how things will be on earth when God reigns, when God’s justice and mercy prevail. Throughout scripture, God’s coming kingdom looks a lot more like the Isaiah feast than this wedding banquet, so maybe Jesus is comparing the way things are now to God’s coming kingdom. Maybe he’s challenging the religious leaders who are good at exclusion and judgement, who are going along with the violence of the Roman Empire, who expect God to be about judgement and wrath. Maybe he is pointing them to something new.

I honestly don’t know. I don’t know why Jesus told this parable and what it means for us. I do know it has been used to justify violence against Jews. If they are the guests who refused, then maybe they can be destroyed, their cities burned. I wonder if the traditional interpretation prevents us from glimpsing and living into God’s coming kingdom of mercy and justice?

Yet, I also know that we all so often oppose and resist God’s justice and God’s invitations to full abundant life. I do want God’s justice to prevail and I know justice involves some type of judgement. How *does* God respond when we resist and oppose God? How *does* God bring justice in our violent world?

We aren’t given answers to these questions. We are given, instead, the faithful and sure witness of Jesus - the ultimate expression of God’s kingdom at work in our world.

In Jesus, we see the one who chose the way of nonviolence. We see someone who looks a lot like the man at the end of the parable. Jesus was willingly stripped of his place of honor at the divine banquet; Jesus remained silent when questioned. And, in his suffering and death, he was cast into all the darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth in our world.

Jesus entered this violence and suffering and in the face of it all, he continued God’s feast. Jesus feasted with the outcasts and the privileged. He fed the hungry and called all to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

As Jesus invited everyone to the feast, he exposed all the ways we exclude ourselves and others from God’s mercy and abundance. He exposed all the brokenness and violence within as well as around us.

But even our sinfulness and violence, even death itself could not stop Jesus from calling us to the feast again and again. The risen Christ is now at work in the feast of his very body and blood to draw all people into God’s promised future.

At this feast, we're shown that we all stand in need of God's mercy and grace. At this feast, we receive it abundantly. We are given the nourishment we need to join the work of bringing in God's kingdom.

At this feast all are welcome, all have a place - especially the outcasts and the sinners. From this feast, all are sent out to serve those in need. We are sent out to go where Jesus goes, to follow him to the places of suffering, to invite others into God's abundance. The meal we share today is the ultimate foretaste of the feast to come, the foretaste of God's promised future.

Thanks be to God.