

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

When we hear today's reading from Matthew, and we hear about the poor guy pulled off the street, slung into the banqueting hall and then tied hand and foot and tossed back out into the outer darkness because he wasn't dressed nicely enough, we think "Poor guy! Since when did clothes matter?" And that's what we're meant to think, "It's so unfair." But that's where most of us stop thinking, and that's the problem Matthew is pointing at. We stop thinking.

The common way of reading this parable is as an allegory, a story that has a hidden moral meaning. (There's some great stuff on not reading it as an allegory that has the hero of the story being the guy getting tossed out, but it will take more explaining than I can do today). Reading this parable as an allegory,¹ God is the king, Jesus is the king's son, the first set of guests are the pharisees and Jewish leaders who are challenging Jesus' authority in this parable, the burned city is Jerusalem which the Romans trashed to put down a rebellion in 70CE, the second set of guests, the folks who were both good and bad (Matthew 22:10), are regular people, a mix of Jews and gentiles off the streets, and the guy tossed out was one of those regular people. I'm sure that makes the entire thing clear.

In a parable, especially with a ton of characters in it, we get invited to try on all the characters, kind of like playing dress-up when we were kids and we were ballerinas or wizards. Most of us don't try on the roles of king or king's son, because we already know we're never going to have to do that gig.

But we look at the first set of guests, the ones who were too busy to come and we get it. We see their mistake. They let their daily living make them too busy to attend to things of the spirit. They let their own power and busy-ness convince them that they had no use for the king's invitation.²

We look at the second set of guests and we think, yeah, I'm much more likely to get invited to a royal banquet because of some major logistics failure. I'll be picking up groceries at Market Basket and some guy will come up to me in the parking lot. He's got to fill the local VFW hall for a wedding reception this afternoon and would I pleeeeeeeze help him out. Maybe I say "yes", maybe I say "no". But if I'm going, I'd probably head home to take a shower and put on something decent and grab at least a blank card to wish them well. Maybe slip a \$20 in there. It will be at least a free sandwich and it's a neighborly thing to do.

¹ Susan Grove Eastman, "Proper 23, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 22:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 167.

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, in *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 188.

We look at the second set of guests in the parable and we get it. We see where they did it right. They said “yes” and turned up.

But the guy who got bound hand and foot and tossed in the outer darkness. What did he do wrong? He was also out on the street, and he also said “yes” and turned up. Maybe he wasn’t dressed super fancy. I don’t know about your Market Baskets in New Hampshire, but in mine down in Lawrence, nobody dresses even a little fancy. So what, exactly, did he do wrong?

[Pause to let folks think about that]

Matthew knew there were people, particularly people of power and influence, who were not going to accept Jesus as the Messiah. It broke his heart, but he knew that. He pitied them. And Matthew knew there were people who would accept Jesus as the Messiah and they would work for the rest of their lives to help bring forth the kingdom of heaven. They rejoiced his heart and he dedicated himself to supporting their efforts in the face of all the people who rejected them.

But I think what frightened him, terrified him, were the people said they accepted Jesus as the Son of God and yet nothing in their lives or in their hearts changed. The people who rejected Jesus could be fought against or persuaded or ignored. But they weren’t in the banqueting hall. The ones who said they had accepted Jesus, but weren’t willing to let anything change in their lives, they were at the feast. And they were dead weight, dragging all the others down. For a tiny, tiny community like Matthew’s, that was so dangerous. And yet there was no way to weed them out. God was the one that had to choose the good from the bad.

When we are fragile and weary, when our hearts are broken and we’re grieving, we recite the 23rd Psalm. *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.* We pray the Lord’s Prayer, *give us this day our daily bread.* In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus fed the 5,000 and then he fed the 4,000. Only a few chapters further on in Matthew’s gospel, we’ll hear his telling of the Last Supper, how Jesus ate with his disciples and asked them to make a ritual meal a part of the way we show that we remember him. We have to let Jesus change us, we must “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Romans 13:14), we have to let Jesus bring us to a table with shining faces and fancy clothes that we’d been saving because we were so psyched to be at this dinner.

If having the right clothes is the way to enter the Kingdom of Heaven then I’m doomed. A lot of people are doomed. And frankly, a lot of people who can afford extremely fancy wedding garments are guaranteed entry. And that makes no sense, when we think about it. The king’s complaint about the wedding garment has to mean something else. We have to think it through. It means we have to

change our lives when we come to banquet, when we accept a place at the Lord's table.

Stewardship season, when we put in our pledges for the coming year, is an opportunity to change, to show how much Jesus is changing our lives. This Stewardship season will be different because we'll be spread out. But as a church we've changed as well. In addition to our regular pledge forms, we're also offering on-line pledging, where you can set up and control the amount of your weekly or monthly pledge. On the last page of the bulletin this week, there's a form you can fill out and get to Rena either through the box at the back of the sanctuary or the Post Office. Or you can do the whole thing on-line by text or by following the link. Just click "Sign In," register for a new account, then set up your recurring pledge for next year. Talk about fancy!

This year the Stewardship campaign is slightly shorter and we are more spread apart. I'd ask, for the sanity of the folks who have to put together the budget and who will help in gathering up the pledges, please get your pledge in early. We know this is an uncertain time and completely understand if a few months from now you have to change your pledge amount. But it makes such a difference to the abundance of the meal we can offer if we have an idea of what you hope to be able to pledge.

Matthew was worried about the people who never thought about what it meant to follow Jesus. They would come to the feast that God was offering and insist that they could attend unchanged and unthinking. As his disciples, dressed in our wedding garments, we know following Jesus means we have to think, we have to change. But what a wonderful meal, what a wonderful dinner party to be invited to, full of changing, thinking people.