

Proper 23(A) Matthew 22: 1-14.

I thought a lot about this passage from Exodus this week. I'm not going to preach on it this morning, but I admit that there is a serious temptation . . . Moses is the religious leader of God's people. He gets called away for a while and leaves Aaron in charge in his absence. Then that enforced absence goes on a little bit longer than anyone had anticipated. Is this sounding familiar yet? I'm not going to preach on it, but let's just make a commitment now not to forge a golden calf in Paris's absence, and let's save her the trouble that Moses has to go through of convincing God not to destroy God's people.

Instead of dwelling on that passage from Exodus, I want us to take this difficult parable from Matthew. Difficulties abound with this story, beginning with its historical use. This parable is the third of three consecutive parables that Jesus tells, warning religious leaders that they need to repent, and that God's kingdom, of which they think they are the stewards, is much broader than they imagine. Christian history has used all three of these parables as allegories to claim that God has rejected Jews because of their unfaithfulness, and now prefers Gentiles.

This is a poisonous reading that has had poisonous consequences, helping Christians to dehumanize Jews, thus enabling pogroms, oppression, and even the holocaust. But for Matthew's community, this passage is an argument about leadership among Jewish people. Matthew's first community would have been comprised mostly (though not entirely) of Christian Jews or Jewish Christians. The question at stake here is who is reading the signs right in following Israel's God: the established leaders, the chief priests and Pharisees, or the small, disenfranchised Christian Jewish minority. Matthew's community was not coming up with justifications for persecuting Jews: they were themselves Jewish and did not have enough power to persecute anyone.

But okay, if many of our Christian forebears have done something bad with this story, and we know that we're not going to do that, then what can we do with this story? Even without its troubling history of interpretation, the story is still a little strange.

Most of us have hosted a dinner party before, and this is pretty much a description for how Jackie and I always host a dinner party. You know, first you get the party ready. Then you send out messengers to invite all the most powerful and dignified people you know. And of course, they ignore your invitation. So you send out more messengers, this time having them describe the great banquet you've prepared. But you know, some of the invitees ignore your messengers, and others kill them. So then you go and kill all the original invitees and burn down their towns. And then, after you burn down the towns, you decide to invite anyone who will come, and you go out to the streets and just start asking people in, whether they're good or bad, until finally your house is full. And then finally, once the party is going, you rigorously enforce the dress code. So if you'd like to host a Foyers Dinner, get in touch with Rachel Bergstrom.

Okay, I'm kidding around here, but my point is that this is not a literal description of anything—it's not a literal description of a party, it's not a literal description of God's plan of salvation. It's a parable. It is meant to be provocative, to challenge our assumptions; it is meant to make us think.

And the first thing it makes me think about is this beautiful image of the kingdom of heaven as a feast. What is the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God? It is like a feast. God's kingdom is a big party. Now, I don't think that it's right to say that the kingdom of

heaven is the same thing as the church. But I do think that it's okay to ask the church: have we come to the party? Are we feasting? It feels very strange to feast these days. We had this terrible summer, where so many awful things happened: Ferguson, ISIS, the Ukraine, plane crashes, and so on. And September was national hunger awareness month, so a number of us went to a few events where we heard, repeatedly, about how prevalent hunger is in Chicago, in the United States, and even in Oak Park and River Forest. In the face of all the terrible news stories we hear about so much, it is counter-intuitive to insist on feasting.

But when I ask whether we are feasting, I'm not really asking whether we are being gluttonous regarding food. I'm talking instead about our understanding of God's grace: do we truly believe that there is enough of God's grace for everyone? Do we believe that God's love is powerful enough for us to be able to do something about these intractable problems of hunger, systemic racism, and war? Feasting as citizens of God's kingdom means rejecting the narrative of scarcity: the story that there is little of worth out there, and so we must do everything we can to get ahold of some of it and then cling to it for all we're worth.

I grew up a Pentecostal, and in that tradition the feast of God's kingdom was something in the future: it was a promise about the afterlife. But now, I think the more important place to put God's feast is now, not as the goal of our actions, but as the origin of our actions. God's feast is not first the afterlife that we are going to; it is first the spiritual reality of grace that we live from.

Being at God's party, living from the feast of God's kingdom, means acting from the assurance that God's love and God's world are abundant. There is enough food in the world for everyone—if enough of us would only share it. There is enough love in God that no one is forced to hate or be lonely. Are we feasting? Do we receive and give with joy, knowing that there is always enough grace and love to carry us?

This king, when he isn't in a murderous rage, is beautifully indiscriminate in his invitations: he invites the dignitaries and then, when they don't come, he just invites the whole town. Because there is enough, there will be enough. We do not have to band together in a little tribe and put up walls against those who might threaten our resources. Instead, we too can be indiscriminate in who we invite to the feast, in who we help, in who we love. What I really like about this king, setting aside for a moment the killing and burning part, is that he is determined that this party is going to happen. The only questions are whether or not we are willing to come, and who we are willing to invite.

But then there's this guy with no robe. What's going on there? I don't think this is a command to wear our Sunday best. Let's just play along with the parable for a moment. This guest wasn't planning to come—he just got invited to the party off the street. Of course he doesn't have a wedding gown! But then, everyone else was just invited off the street, too. No one else would have had a gown either. For it to make sense, it must be the case that they were giving out gowns to all the guests. Like at a snooty restaurant, "Perhaps the gentleman would be more comfortable in a wedding gown?" I think that what's going on here is that everyone is invited to the feast, but there are some standards once you get there. Thankfully, God provides us with everything we need, whether it's a wedding gown, or some notion of justification, or forgiveness, or just something to contribute.

My friends, we're all invited to the party, and we all have something to contribute. Bring your gifts, the party needs them. Join in! Let's party! Amen.