“A Muddled Guest List”

Matthew 22:1-14

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March 8, 2015

This is a rather ugly parable compared to last week. Last week we heard Jesus talk about those laborers in the vineyard. The ones who were hired throughout the day and were all paid the same. We were reminded that God’s love and grace is given to all equally, regardless of when they come to know Christ. It was an uplifting illustration of what life in the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

This week? This week we hear about this wedding banquet which turns rather violent. It starts of rather mild – with a king throwing a wedding party for his son. We can make the connection between the king and God, and the son and Jesus. The first part of this story makes the Kingdom of Heaven sound amazing! It’s going to be like this great feast where everyone is eating exotic foods, enjoying a celebration. It sounds like a good time for everyone.

But Matthew turns this image into a big, fat, violent wedding. Blood is shed and the king is turned into this gruesome figure who gets very bitter when people turn down his invitation. Refuse to show up? He’ll send his slaves to torture and kill. Show up in the wrong outfit? The King will throw you into the outer darkness, where torment awaits.

There aren’t a lot of sunshine, lollipops and rainbows in Matthew’s telling of this parable.

As a preacher, I’m tempted to wander over to Luke, who also tells a version of this parable. Luke tells a much more mild version of the story. His leaves out that bit about killing and torture. In Luke’s version, the dinner host simply shrugs off all those who rsvp no to his party. He says “well, that’s okay. Go out into the streets and invite anyone you encounter. I’m sure they’ll appreciate the party more than those I invited anyway.”

Luke’s version is much easier to preach. I have to confess, I often prefer Luke’s version of the story over Matthew’s.

But our text for today is in Matthew. And so we’ll stick with this gospel writer who presents a darker tale.

This ought to get us wondering, what are we to make of these two versions of the same parable? There are many times in the four Gospels where there is overlap. Similar stories are told. But there are always a few variations offered by the authors. What are we to make of those and how do we figure out what is the truth?

We need to look at the core of the story, and see what both versions have in common. Matthew and Luke both tell a story about a great feast where certain people are invited, but the guests decide not to come. The host of the party doesn’t cancel the party, he just goes out and invites people off the streets. Regardless of whether or not they are suitable guests. That’s where the commonality ends between these two stories.

Matthew elaborates a bit more, adding those details about the king’s reaction. You might say that Matthew has a flare for the dramatic – adding portions that are not found in other versions. In this case, as well as elsewhere in his gospel, he adds violence to the story. It isn’t enough to say that the king just replaced those who refused to come. Matthew goes on to report that he had those people killed because they didn’t want to attend the party.

Matthew is a fire and brimstone preacher. He could give Jonathan Edwards a run for his money. He loves any opportunity he can get to add that weeping and gnashing of teeth bit. He loves to talk about genocide and mass killings. He was probably the type of boy who would make his GI Joes slaughter all of the Barbies and cabbage patch dolls. He was the type of boy that therapists would love to psychoanalyze.

There’s a reason, however, that Matthew has this fixation on violence. Just like any author, we have to recognize the lens through which he sees the world. Anytime someone is sharing information, it is good to know their background, where they are coming from. It’s like when you turn on the news, you have to recognize that there’s going to be some level of bias depending on which network you select. Everyone has an agenda, a slant with which they present stories. Matthew is no different.

He is writing in a time of great violence. And he is writing for an audience who has been victims of great violence. He wrote his Gospel just after the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem. His context is one of chaos and fear. Those who followed Jesus were living in an incredibly dangerous and upsetting time. They faced persecution and hostility by those who rejected Christ.

Editorializing a bit, Matthew adds his own thoughts about those who rejected the king’s invitation to the party. He draws a comparison between the slaves who were sent out to fetch the guests, with the early Christians. They were like the evangelists who were spreading the good news of the Gospel. And he compares the guests who refused the invitation, to those who rejected Christ and persecuted Christians.

This theologian preaches a gospel of rejection and torment for those who reject Christ and torment Christians.

Can we really blame Matthew for being so fixated on violence?

I think about communities that have been ravaged by violence. Those who have been bombed or raided. Terrorized by war. It seems only natural for them to hope for harm for their enemies. We live in a world that embraces the ‘eye for an eye’ framework. We want revenge and punishment for those who hurt us. We want them to suffer just as we have suffered.

Matthew wants his enemies to suffer just as he and his people have suffered. This may be why he adds his own thoughts about the punishment of the wedding guests. Why he presents a violent story while other versions make no mention of such violence. Matthew seems to exaggerate the message that Christ originally gave. Elaborates on the story, adding his own personal theology. Losing sight of the original story that Christ told.

There are times when we struggle with this, just like Matthew. Times when we go on tangents, adding our own details to God’s story, losing sight of God’s original intention for the message of the Gospel. We convince ourselves that we know what God thinks about situations.

I saw this happen this weekend at the Presbytery meeting. The floor was debating some very serious issues that were being voted on. The room was quite divided on one issue in particular, and I winced every time I heard someone say “God would support this stance” and then I’d hear the other side of the debate make the same claim for their own stance. My question is: If we knew what God thought about this issue, why would we need to debate about it? Wouldn’t it be clear cut, and we could just skip this whole process?

Because the truth is, more often than not, we don’t really understand what God thinks about the hot button topics of our day. Try as we might, we cannot read God’s mind. And we can’t manipulate God’s Word to justify the cause we are fighting for.

We Christians have done this throughout history, when we try to explain salvation. We try to manipulate scripture to justify our thinking about who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. We follow Matthew’s lead, by letting our emotions get in the way. Letting our experiences taint our theology. We judge others and place them in the category of those who will condemned to eternity in hell. We make assumptions about a person’s salvation, and justify them by claiming God would agree with us.

The truth is, we don’t know what a person’s fate will be. In our Reformed theology of the Presbyterian Church, we do believe that God chooses people for life in the Kingdom of Heaven. But it isn’t up to us to decide who is in and who is out. One of the founding theologians of our church, John Calvin, even said that it is a waste of time to try and figure out who is chosen and who is not. There’s no point in us getting worked up over it, because everyone’s fate is in God’s hands.

Maybe our assumptions about who is in and who is out of the Kingdom of God are completely wrong. We assume certain people are worthy and likely to have a ticket to heaven.

What about the times in Scripture when we see God’s display of grace and mercy extend beyond our own sense of grace and mercy? Like last week’s parable in the vineyard where equal grace was given to all, regardless of when they showed up. The Gospels seem to overturn our understanding of who is worthy and who is unworthy. Who is in the Kingdom of Heaven and who is out.

If we set aside the bloody, violent nature of Matthew’s version, we see tremendous grace from God in this parable. Verse 10 is the pivotal moment: the slaves go out to find replacement guests. They invite both good and bad to the party. Not those who were worthy, or deemed respectable. Anyone on the street who was willing to show up, they were granted entrance to the party.

The bigger picture here is that the guest list for Kingdom of God is broader than we want to admit. It’s muddled. Not clear cut. And it’s not up to us to decide who is on it.

God’s grace is so huge, it includes the good and the bad, the outcasts and the insiders, the rich and the poor. This rather muddled guest list makes for one unique party in the Kingdom of Heaven!

May our minds set aside our own biases and assumptions. May our hearts be open to what God really desires for the world. May grace and mercy abound. Let us pray….