

Proper 23A – October 12, 2014
Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
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Our gospel passage today depicts the refusal to a banquet invitation by invited guests, resulting in the invitation to another group of invited guests. Unfortunately we aren't hearing the best version of this parable today. The original intent of this parable in the context and form Jesus spoke it is captured more closely in Luke's gospel,ⁱ and has Jesus responding to the well-scrubbed, morally righteous religious leaders who had pre-judged and excluded from the party, as it were, foreigners, public sinners, women, the poor, and publicans—that's publicans not Republicans! As he does in the parables of the Laborers in the Vineyard and the Lost Sheep, Jesus says, in essence, in this parable, "You leaders are like the guests who have slighted the invitation to the great banquet. You would not receive the invitation because to receive it you need to have open minds and hearts, and open hands to reach out to others—hence, God has called the publicans and sinners and foreigners and women and the poor and has offered them the relationship you have spurned." This is how this parable is portrayed in Luke, with a focus on the great banquet as a symbol for being all together in God's kingdom of love.

Now, when we come to our gospel reading from Matthew, it's important that we look carefully; for Matthew takes this original parable about openness, and turns it into a line-by-line allegory to fit the understanding he had of God's plan of salvation *in the context* of the heated family fight in which his Gentile and Jewish-Christian community found itself. By the time of the writing of Matthew's gospel there had been an already 40-year family fight between the early church and its mother Judaism. This came to a head in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., and in the death of many Jews and Jewish Christians; thus seriously damaging the national focus and identity of Judaism, resulting in its scattering, or Diaspora, as it's called. In order to keep its identity, the now scattered Jewish leadership closed its Biblical canon in 90 C.E. (to what we now call the Old Testament) and officially distanced itself from this new Christian community which had grown from, and had been nurtured by, its mother Judaism.

Matthew wrote his gospel account sometime after 80 CE writing for his mixed Gentile and Jewish Christian community in Antioch, nearly 300 miles north of Jerusalem. This was ten years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and after the subsequent Diaspora of many Jews and Jewish-Christians to more distant lands. The old centers of their universe—Jerusalem and the temple—were gone. The Romans had begun full-blown persecution and were bearing down hard on Jews and Christians. Matthew's community needed reassurance, so Matthew cast Jesus as the new center of their universe, the focus of every promise, the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets. These early Christians were in danger of being obliterated by Roman persecution. And so, the long-simmering family fight between the early church and its mother Judaism, along with the destruction of Jerusalem, the Diaspora and all-out Roman persecutions, left many on both sides smarting; and the rhetoric in the writings of the time from this escalating family fight, including what would become the New Testament's Gospels—especially the Gospels of Matthew and then John—got all the more polemical and downright nasty.

In the meantime, the early Christian community had grown well outside the confines of its Jewish roots and was spreading rapidly across the pagan Roman world. So again, what we

find in Matthew is this parable—originally a story about *openness*—now being turned into a much more belligerent allegory that, in fact, undermines Jesus’ primary intent of his parable! Every line in Matthew’s version alludes to the rejection by the Jews of Jesus, the Gospel and the early Church—and even implies their collusion to do so—all of which sends a strong message of *closedness* instead; whereby the guests who refuse the invitation are the Jews, and the city that is burned is Jerusalem, and the only ones left to invite are the non-Jews, the Gentiles.ⁱⁱ That sure sounds different than Luke’s version!

It’s interesting to see how the whole gospel of Matthew is structured around this theme that, in the heat of the family fight with Judaism, closes a door to the Jews, while the letters of Paul and to some extent, Mark’s and Luke’s gospels, keep that door open. And so, the gospel of Matthew begins with the visit of the wise men from the East to the babe in Bethlehem, defining the great Epiphany moment and all that happens thereafter as the manifestation of Jesus to the wider non-Jewish *foreign* world.ⁱⁱⁱ Now, further along in the gospel, the apostolic mission as defined by Jesus does have him sending the twelve out with the following instructions, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”^{iv} And Matthew even has Jesus portrayed with the Canaanite woman, saying to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”^v only to have him change his mind in the middle of that encounter. But by the time we reach this 22nd chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we hear a real shift in the focus of the mission—now, because there were no more lost sheep of the house of Israel to go to, as many were killed or dispersed from 70 C.E. on—or weren’t worth going to as implied in our allegory we hear in today’s reading—so, from here on they are going only to the *goyim*, the Gentiles. This reaches its crescendo in Jesus’ final directive on mission, at the end of Matthew’s gospel, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”^{vi}

Now the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” we hear about at the end is another one of Matthew’s trademark phrases with which he ends many of Jesus’ parables, which he reinterprets to fit his context. As I’ve said, his version of this great banquet or marriage feast is significantly different from Luke’s, and much more frightening, to the point of being dangerous. Dangerous, yes. For example, there is a lasting and evil legacy identified with one particular verse in Matthew’s gospel, and only Matthew’s, account of the Passion of Christ, where we hear this line, “Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and our children.’”^{vii} Now, to be fair, Matthew places the shouting of the crowd particularly as coming from the voices of the followers, or partisans, of the Zealot leader Barabbas, determined to save their leader whatever it might cost this other man named Jesus. Yet, we know that the centuries-long descent into the night of Auschwitz used the warped twisting of that verse to justify such evil on a massive scale. Christians who taunted Jews throughout the centuries with accusations of “Christ-killers” have not only twisted Matthew’s story of the Passion of Jesus, but have entirely missed its ultimate purpose, namely to point us again, and encourage our recommitment, to this Jesus, this misunderstood Jew, whose mission was and still is the repair and reconciliation of all false divisions which prevent the unity in diversity of all humankind and all Creation with God. More than 1,930 years after this gospel account was written, if this and other inflammatory passages, such as Matthew’s rendering of the parable we heard this morning, are read aloud without acknowledging both their proper context and the evil done by their misappropriations, we would once again be complicit with the evil which wrought the Holocaust, as well as milder yet pernicious forms of anti-Semitism and other divisive and destructive rifts within the world today.

So, good and bad guests will be gathered into the wedding hall, Matthew says, and there will they be sorted out. Again, his story is more allegory than parable. All in all, in this version from Matthew, it's a party we would rather not be invited to, but we are! The question is how we will respond to the invitation in our day. On this Sunday we are urged to increase our respect for holy invitations. Matthew's gospel portrays a rather frightening wedding banquet where good and bad guests are gathered and then sorted out. And the poorly dressed guest at the end of the story? Well, he represents people who think they can stroll into a deep covenant relationship any way they please. Fortunately, we take a much milder approach here in this parish – we welcome people who aren't even sure they want to be here, or who aren't sure of what or who they are looking for; thus allowing them to belong before they believe, as it were. Having said that, all of us are called to be ready, not just for the great heavenly banquet far in the future, but for the banquet now—ready for God's presence and purpose in our lives. Every Sunday we celebrate that presence and purpose with this special meal we have at this altar. We say this explicitly when we invite all to the table, "Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia." God invites us to wear the special clothes of humility and justice, and eat the food of forgiving love, and sit with all, especially and including the poor, the sick, the marginalized.^{viii} And here we offer a feast of rich food – in our worship and community life, our mutual care and increasingly outward focus. Guests at this feast may come even in sweat pants—just as they are. From there the invitation is to go deeper in your spiritual journey and with this church family. So, here we are. Welcome to the banquet!

ⁱ Luke 14:16-24

ⁱⁱ The allegorization of Matthew's rendering of this parable can, in fact can be read like this with the allusions put plainly into the text:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, i.e. God, who gave a marriage feast for his son, i.e. Jesus, and sent his servants, i.e. the prophets, to call those...invited, i.e. the Jews, to the marriage feast but they would not come, i.e. they rejected Jesus...He sent other servants saying, 'Tell those...invited, "Behold...everything is ready; come to the...feast." But they made light of it and went...one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants...and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops, i.e. Rome's Tenth Legion, and destroyed those murderers and burned their city, i.e. Jerusalem which fell in 70 C.E. Then he said to his servants, i.e. the apostles, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the...feast as many as you can find, i.e. non-Jews (=Gentiles), since the king's troops had killed the Jews.' And those servants...gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall, i.e. the entire church membership, was filled with guests, i.e. Gentile-Christians."

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 2:1-12

^{iv} Matthew 10:5-6

^v Matthew 15:24

^{vi} Matthew 28:19

^{vii} Matthew 27:25

^{viii} See the table grace of Brigid of Kildare