

Eph. 3:

St. Matt. 22: 1-14

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Let us start by posing blunt and honest questions. What does the Kingdom of God look like to you? Does this Gospel sound anything like your image of it or a place you want to sit? If the Kingdom is open to all, then where do we find our place with all our imperfections? What does the Reign of the Father look like?

We have just heard one of the most challenging and strained parables in all of Scripture and have prefaced and concluded it with our liturgical acclamations, “Glory be to thee, O Lord” and “Praise be to thee, O Christ”. You will likely admit that feels like quite a leap. If Karl Barth is right in saying all parables are about Jesus and the supremacy of grace, then the first thing to understand is we cannot make the mistake of reading this literally! In far too much of the popular mind and imagination God is merely a version of humanity writ large with all its traits, including jealousy and vengefulness. The New Atheism peddles this when it sees stories like our parable, or OT accounts, and levels accusations at us of worshiping a God who is a brute using terror to keep the populace in control. Simplistic and predictable literalism leads down this path. We need to take a different road.

The Southern Catholic writer, Flannery O’Connor, wrote novels about often unappealing events and grotesque characters which were part of her Georgian landscape. If you have ever read any of them like, A Good Man is Hard to Find, then you know what she meant when she said that to get a message understood it was necessary to shock. “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do,” she said, “you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” Jesus often did exactly the same in order to open the eyes and ears of those complacent about God and God’s desire to make all things new; especially lives too engrained and comfortable with the world as it is.

We have a television channel on cable that plays Christmas movies year around. The miracle would be if you ever were surprised by the plot. It goes like this: girl has a business in a small snowy town; the business and girl are struggling; a handsome stranger appears and helps her restore it; they fall in love, but he leaves and she is forlorn; he reappears and they make up and life goes on happily ever after! There is no need to hire script writers since you just have to change the names for the next episode. It is deadly predictable. This parable is precisely the opposite—it stuns. So, for a few moments reflect on what it actually says and be clear that it rearranges the furniture in your family room! Like many parables it pushes credibility to its very limits in order to shock, prod, and allow us to see what is necessary and true and holy. And let me suggest that you may find it is full of unapparent grace.

Unlike Luke, who tells this with ‘a person’ asking the people to a party, Matthew says the King sent out messengers bearing invitations to the wedding of his son and anticipated an affirmative reaction. What he receives is disinterest and excuses. God is inviting people to the marriage of heaven and earth asking us to participate in his sharing of divine life-love-hope. Imagine for a moment as an Anglican that you had an emissary from Buckingham Palace show up at your door and told you that the Queen wanted to pay for you to spend a week in London, see all the sites, and sit down over a stunning meal with her, and bring all your friends with

you. What would you say? “Oh, I don’t know...I need to check my schedule and make sure I’m not having burgers and beer with the neighbors”? Really?! This is the first shock. People ignore the very gifts of God’s life and select the trivial. So, a second invitation goes out and tells them this is a first-class event. But those invited aren’t impressed and now the sci-fi horror begins. The servants are seized and dispatched. And then, as if this tale couldn’t get more distasteful, the King responds by cutting loose on his own real estate as well as the invitees. At this point most hearers would ask, “What else can possibly happen?” Well, it appears that the kitchen crew has remarkable skills or else it’s leftovers, because the banquet is still on and now the King breaks protocol and invites both the good and the bad to share in his celebration. When there is finally a brief respite in the tension the King arrives only to find someone, who was impelled to attend, not properly dressed and upbraids him and casts him into the darkness.

Reality has been pushed to the breaking point in the telling of this story. Let me suggest to you that perhaps this is just the end and eye of the needle. Jesus tells this stark and violent tale, full of images that do not fit our easy assumptions about God intentionally. He wants us to see behind the contradictions how much God desires to have us share in his life.

This parable is an allusion to human history. God attempts over and over again through the law and the prophets to invite us into His life and it is rejected. The result is injustice, hatred, usury, and failed human community—signs of death. The judgment is not so much external wrathfulness as it is the result of refusing God’s overtures. Let us also be clear that when the parable talks of the King’s anger, we cannot assign human attributes to God, as if God gets his nose bent out of joint in the way we do. God’s anger is more akin to passion. It is related to God’s deep desire to share fullness of life with us; life that is marked by being included in his energy, compassion, love, and celebration. When we refuse that the result is depletion and loss of life.

If we take a step further in this tense story, we find the supremacy and sovereignty of Grace. All are invited into the celebration of the marriage of heaven and earth; both the good and the bad. No one is excluded. The only difference between any of those in the story is that some actually show up—they take God seriously enough to accept the invitation. The man who loses his place is not cast out because of his moral stature; it is that he fails to participate in the celebratory nature of the great Banquet. For him it appears that this is just ‘life as usual’. St. Gregory suggested it was that he didn’t wear charity—the very love of God that had been supplied to him. “Many are called, but few chosen”. Given that in Aramaic many means all, this may be qualitative, not quantitative.

I wish to be honest with you that I find this parable disturbing in many aspects. Perhaps what is most disquieting is the image it gives of what life is like when we reject God’s overt invitation to share in his life and to share that life in the world. I know I am involved in that. When I hear the language in our political life used to denigrate others simply because of their positions; when in our relationships with one another we select self-service over opportunities to salve and bring healing; when we chose a culture of death that deems the life of others to be less important because they are too young or too old or...; those are deeply troubling because they do not look like the Reign of God.

We who are baptized into God's life are in a new and renewed context; we have been chosen into God's love, and our living resonates to different music, and to redeemed practices. Grace accepts us as we are; it does not mean we are to stay where we are.

In spite of appearances to the contrary this parable is about the great Banquet which is an image for the Kingdom of God. Participation is on God's terms. Where else in Scripture do we hear of wedding feasts and great banquets that celebrate the life, energy, and love of God for his people? There is Cana in Galilee; the return of the Prodigal; Easter evening at Emmaus; the Last Supper. Recall the poetic rendering in Isaiah 25: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death for ever..." The Reign of God is NOT just one thing among a series of other options in life; it is the only thing that gives true life. Amen+