

Each week, the Rev. Dr. David Lose writes a blog post in the form of a letter to his fellow preachers. The letter discusses one the scripture texts that many preachers will be addressing that Sunday. In reference to this parable of the wedding feast, Dr. Lose opened his letter this way: “Dear Partner in Preaching, Let’s just admit it: this is an ugly parable. No amount of generalizing about God’s hospitality or vulnerability or invitation is going to do away with that.”¹ The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor had a similar opinion when she delivered a sermon on this parable at the Duke University Chapel in 2008. Her opening paragraph reads,

“If Matthew and Luke had churches in my town, I would definitely go to Luke’s church. Every time I visit Matthew’s church, I sit near the door. Things are so clear-cut for him. In his world you are either a sheep or a goat, wheat or tare, a wise maiden or a foolish one. If you pretend to be one when you are in fact the other, then woe to you, you hypocrite – you wolf in sheep’s clothing, you splinter picker with loggy eyes. Three guesses where you are headed when the kingdom comes!”²

Rev. Taylor calls Matthew a “fire and brimstone preacher” saying that “he gets really excited about hell which he conceives as a burning trash dump where a lot of sorry hypocrites are going to grind their teeth for all eternity.”³ In comparison, this hell that Matthew describes is only mentioned once in Luke. In Taylor’s words, the author of Matthew’s gospel “puts hell in Jesus’ mouth” over and over. Jesus may or may not have said these things that Matthew writes, but for some reason, of the four gospel writers, only Matthew decided to include them.

An entire seminary class could be dedicated to the different parables and references to hell in Matthew’s gospel, but this morning, I think it is important to unpack just this one. There is some extremely important and relevant context surrounding this

¹ David Lose, “Pentecost 18 A: Preaching an Ugly Parable,” *In the Meantime* (blog), October 6, 2014, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/pentecost-18-a-preaching-an-ugly-parable/>.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Exposed! The Imposter Syndrome,” October 12, 2008, <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2008/081012.pdf>.

³ Taylor.

parable that may help us understand where Matthew was coming from and what he was trying to communicate. First, it is important to understand that in reading this parable, we are glimpsing what David Lose calls “a low point in an intense family feud.”⁴ At the time of the gospel’s writing, Matthew and his community are in the midst of struggle with their fellow Israelites about how to be faithful to their God and specifically if Jesus was the Messiah promised by the prophets. This tension in Matthew should not be read as a Jewish vs. Christian fight, but instead as a witness to the dispute within the Israelite community and the pain experienced as a result. To add more stress to the situation, the Romans had recently squashed a Jewish revolt and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, the central place for worship of the Jewish people.

This parable of the wedding feast also appears in the gospel of Luke and the gospel of Thomas but with some major differences. Both Luke and Thomas describe the event in the parable as a “great dinner.” Matthew changes the occasion to a Wedding Banquet which makes the guests’ refusal to attend even more difficult to imagine. It’s one thing to RSVP for a dinner party and then bail at the last minute, it’s a whole other thing to RSVP for the Prince’s wedding and then say you’re too busy to come. Matthew’s version of the parable only gets more and more absurd as it continues.

In the other versions of the parable, once the invited guests have all declined to attend the dinner, the host instructs his servants to invite all kinds of people to attend in their place, specifically those who were poor or blind or suffering from other ailments. But in Matthew, things take a dark and violent turn. When the invited guests initially decline, the king sends his servants back out to try to convince them to come, saying the oxen and the fatted calves are ready to eat! Some of the guests make light of the request but others seize the servants, abuse them and even kill them. What? Who does that? Then as if things aren’t already weird, the king decides to put the food in the fridge and wage war on the ungrateful guests destroying them and burning their city. As if things couldn’t get more strange, the king declares that the wedding feast is back on and everyone is invited! The servants go into the streets (except didn’t we just read that

⁴ Lose, “Pentecost 18 A: Preaching an Ugly Parable.”

the city was destroyed?) and they gather everyone they find, the good, the bad, and the ugly. After all the king has gone through to make this party happen, he then notices one guest is not dressed appropriately. As punishment, the king has the guest tied up and thrown into the darkness.

Many parables are a bit absurd. But this one is simply ridiculous and the callous violence on the part of the king, whom we are to suppose is God, might shake our faith in a God of love and forgiveness. Why is Matthew's version of this parable so different? So much more violent and grim? Dr. Lose explains that "at this point in the family conflict [Matthew] is willing to say that God not only rejects those cousins and kin of his that rejected Jesus but actually sent the Romans to destroy the Temple as punishment."⁵ Matthew is writing his gospel while his community is struggling to make sense of its feelings of estrangement and rejection by the wider Israelite community and to explain why God would allow their temple to be destroyed and the oppressive Roman occupation to continue.

So what do we do with a parable like this? Do we simply learn the historical context, decide it doesn't apply to us and then throw it out as useless? I don't think so. I think there are truths in this parable and that our Still Speaking God may be at work in its words for us this morning. I have preached on Luke's version of this parable and focused on the detail that when the initial dinner party guests (those we might assume are the elite of the kingdom) refuse to come to the party, the king invites everyone and specifically instructs his servants to seek out those who likely never get invited to dinner parties. The king as a symbol for God, desires for all of us to come to the feast of divine grace.

But with Matthew's version, I am drawn to the detail about the guest who isn't wearing the right clothes. There are so many unanswered questions about this detail. If the servants gathered everyone from the streets of the city, I find it odd that only one guest would not have appropriate attire for a royal wedding feast. If this can be explained because wedding robes were provided by the king to be worn for the party,

⁵ Lose.

why did this guest decide not to wear one? And doesn't the punishment seem a little harsh for a dress code violation. Wouldn't simply escorting the person out be enough? It does seem that since there is only one guest at the entire party of all the people in the town who is not wearing the appropriate wedding attire, this guest had control over whether or not he wore the right clothes. When the king asks him why he isn't dressed correctly, the guest does not defend himself. He doesn't say "I am poor and these are the best clothes I had" or "the wedding robes being given to the guests ran out before I could receive one." In fact he says nothing. He has no excuse. (We'll ignore the possibility that he is simply in stunned silence because the king is speaking to him.)

Clearly this is not a simple story about wearing the wrong clothes to a party. Being clothed in the right apparel shows up frequently in Paul's letters as a metaphor for being a disciple of Christ. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." (Col. 3:12) And "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. In his letter to the early church in Rome, Paul encourages them to clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 13:14) In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:27) Maybe the clothing the guest was expected to wear was a metaphor for living as a disciple of Jesus.

God invites us to the party of the kingdom of heaven – not heaven in some far off ethereal sense but heaven here on earth when the ways of God are the reality – love, compassion, kindness, justice. But maybe we need to do more than just show up. Maybe it isn't enough to just say we are guests of the party, but we actually need to act like it. As the Rev. Karoline Lewis puts it "Indeed, it is not enough anymore to call yourself a follower of Christ and then act as if you were sound asleep during the Sermon on the Mount... It is not enough to say you are a "Christian" and then stay silent when life, liberty, and love are in jeopardy."⁶ We get the sense in the parable that the

⁶ Karoline Lewis, "What Not to Wear," *Working Preacher* (blog), October 8, 2017, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4980>.

reason the guest isn't dressed appropriately isn't because he didn't have access to the correct attire, but that he either didn't care, or intentionally chose to wear something inappropriate.

To make sure I'm not misquoted here, this is not a sermon about what to wear to church. This has nothing to do with literal clothes. In fact, Matthew himself wrote "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these." (Matthew 6:28) No, this is not about putting fabric on your body, but about living into a call of being a disciple of Christ – caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, or in the words of the prophet Micah "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) This is about being transformed as we travel along our journey of faith. This is also not about waiting until we have enough money saved up so we can purchase an appropriate outfit for the banquet. The feast is ready now. The Rev. Jill Duffield puts it this way, "We should drop everything and come as we are, but we should also never expect to remain unchanged. Just as the first disciples dropped their nets and followed, we should also respond to God's invitation immediately and fully, trusting that once we do Jesus will welcome us as we are and transform us into who God intends us to be: clothed, in our right minds, witnesses to the generosity and goodness of the One who called us."⁷ We must be willing to be changed and we have to participate in the changing. Jesus isn't going to hold us down and force us to change into our wedding robes.

And what about the guest being thrown into darkness? I don't think we can read the same meaning into this action in this time and place as Matthew was trying to communicate to the original hearers of his Gospel. I imagine that a person who only cares about themselves, their status, their wealth or a church that is too anxious about the future to take risks or focuses on the reasons why serving others just won't work within the current budget, that type of existence does not bring heaven to earth, but

⁷ Jill Duffield, "19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 15, 2017," The Presbyterian Outlook, accessed October 14, 2017, <https://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/19th-sunday-pentecost-october-15-2017/>.

creates more darkness and isolation. It does not serve to bring light and love into the world but instead those who are suffering continue to suffer and will indeed be weeping and gnashing their teeth.

I will close with these words from Karoline Lewis: "What not to wear? Complacency, conformity, and any kind of garb that is content with the way things are. What should we wear, so that the whole of the world can see who we are and what we are about? The kind of compassion, birthed by God's own righteousness, that cannot, anymore, leave things the way they are."⁸

⁸ Lewis, "What Not to Wear."