

THE BANQUET IS READY

MATTHEW 22:1-14
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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Thanksgiving Sunday is one of those interesting Sundays like Mothers Day or Peace Sunday. It is not a “Christian holiday,” per se—it’s not a part of the Christian calendar that is given shape by the career of Jesus—but it *is* an important civic holiday.

And like Mothers Day and Peace Sunday, the theme is quite obviously commendable and eminently worthy of celebration! Why *wouldn't* we use our Sunday worship to celebrate mothers or to promote peace or to focus on thanksgiving?!

On Sundays like this, the easiest thing in the world would be to find a rather harmless text that tells us to be thankful people and preach on that.

Indeed, one of the lectionary texts from this Sunday was from Philippians 4, which tells us to “not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Easy, right?

But we have decided to dwell in the texts from Matthew’s gospel for the time between the end of summer and Advent. I think that sometimes it is good to be challenged to wrestle with difficult stories, whether on Thanksgiving Sunday or any other Sunday.

Today’s text isn’t the most obvious Thanksgiving text, so this will not be an obvious “Thanksgiving sermon.” But I think that thanksgiving themes will emerge.

We have another parable—and one in which Jesus says some hard things.

It’s important, at the outset to remember what parables are and are not. Parables are *not* doctrinal statements, philosophical propositions, or timeless theological statements. They are **stories** told to make a *particular* point to a *particular* people in a *particular* context.

They were often meant to shock, to upend expectations, to jolt and make their hearers re-evaluate their assumptions.

In the four gospels, Jesus' parables are often told to very *religious* people who were convinced that they understood precisely how God worked, who God loved, and what God wanted.

Jesus' parables nearly always turned these expectations and assumptions upside down.

That's what parables do. That's why Jesus told them in the way he did.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way in his book called *Tell it Slant*:

When the words of Jesus become the stuff of arguments, verbal tools for manipulation attempts at control, the life drains out of them and there they are, a raked-up pile of dead leaves on the ground. Just then, the master drops a parable into the conversation. We stumble over it, no longer able to cruise along in the familiar word ruts. The parable forces attention, participation, involvement.¹

Parables are meant to shock, even offend! Our familiarity and comfort with the stories of Jesus ought never to blind us to the fact that this was how they operated in their initial context.

Our text today shares many similarities with last week's parable about the tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-46).

In both stories, there is a character representing God who has expectations about how things should go:

- The vineyard will produce good fruit
- The invitation to the banquet will be gratefully accepted

In both stories, these expectations go unmet:

- The fruit is no good
- The guests refuse the invitation to the banquet

In both stories, the characters representing the people of Israel (or, more specifically, their leaders) deal violently with God's messengers (the prophets):

- The tenants abuse and kill the servants and eventually the son sent to the vineyard
- The wedding guests mistreat and kill the emissaries of the king

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 21-22.

In both stories, the rejection of God leads to disastrous consequences for those who spurned the mandate (to produce fruit) or the invitation (to the banquet):

- The kingdom of God is taken from those convinced that it was theirs to do with as they wished
- The king destroys the city of those who refused his invitation

In both stories, the rejection of God leads to God welcoming of outsiders:

- The kingdom is given to any and all who produce the fruit that the vineyard was made for
- The doors to the banquet are thrown wide open to any and all, good and bad, so that the wedding hall is filled.

In both stories, Jesus is pointing a finger directly at the religious leaders of Israel.

They are the ones who should have been bearing the fruit of the kingdom (and they knew it!).

They are the ones who should have welcomed the Son and been prepared for a party (and they knew it!).

But, in both cases, they rejected God's purposes and God's work among them.

In both cases, Jesus makes clear that the kingdom of God is not about privileged status or birthright or history, but about how one is oriented to the purposes of God.

So far so good. Or not so good, if you happen to be a first century Pharisee or a chief priest ☺.

This much of the parables we understand, I think, based on the last two Sundays.

Most of us, if we are honest, would prefer if the parable ended at verse 10 (indeed, Luke's version of the story ends here [Luke 14:15-24]).

We are there, cheering Jesus on as the king welcomes all into his banquet, regardless of status or ethnicity. We are there, patting Jesus on the back as he puts those self-righteous religious leaders in their place.

Yes, yes, yes! The ungrateful elites are out! The wedding hall is filled with guests!
Hooray!

But Jesus *keeps going*, as he is prone to doing—past the point where we are comfortably nodding our heads in affirmation, past the point where we are inwardly congratulating Jesus for being such a good teacher, so much like us...

It is in verses 11-14 where we start to squirm.

The king notices a man not wearing a wedding robe and asks him how he got in without it. The man has no reply.

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ “For many are invited, but few are chosen

The king’s response seems inexplicable, immoral, even offensive. How can he treat this man so harshly?! The guest quite possibly just arrived off the street, after all! How could he be *possibly* expected to have the right wedding robe?!

The king’s expectation seems unrealistic and the punishment seems wildly disproportionate to the crime!

What’s going on here? Why does Jesus include this part? Why, oh why, couldn’t he have just stopped at verse 10?!

It is here that we must remind ourselves of the point of parables.

Remember what we said earlier: Parables are stories told to make a *particular* point to a *particular* people in a *particular* context. They are often meant to shock, to upend expectations, to jolt us and make us re-evaluate our assumptions.

What expectations and assumptions might Jesus be trying to upend here? What point might Matthew be trying to make to the people he is writing his gospel to?

I think Jesus, in speaking, and Matthew in recording his words for the early church, were very aware that those who now found themselves at the banquet were every bit as human as those who rejected the original invitation!

The greatest tragedy would be if the people who now unexpectedly find themselves at the king's lavish banquet begin to repeat precisely the same errors as those who spurned the initial invitation.

- If they began to take advantage of their place as privileged guests
 - If they paid no attention to the *kind* of banquet it was and how it invited the guests to reorient themselves
 - If they paid no attention to the king or the king's purposes, if they cared little for what the banquet was being held to celebrate
 - If they assumed that their place at the table was theirs to do with whatever they wished
 - If they assumed that the king had no right to expect anything of them as guests!
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We can make the connections easily enough between this story and our context, can't we?

I think that many people throughout church history and right down to the present have been quite happy to accept the invitation to the banquet. But they assume that the story stops here.

They assume that the king's only job is to *invite* and to *welcome*, but not to *demand* anything of them or call them *to* anything once they are in.

So often, particularly in our extremely individualistic culture, we sort of assume that God's main job is to welcome us all as we are in a kind of warm, fuzzy divine embrace, but nothing more than that.

It is true—*gloriously* true!—that God accepts and loves you and I just as we are.

But the truth is much bigger and better news than that we have been invited to the banquet of the king. The bigger and better news is that we are not only *invited*, but *summoned to a new life!*

The bigger and better news is that the king means to use the banquet to make his guests kingdom-people. Once we have accepted the invitation, we are to put on the appropriate attire.

God accepts us and loves us, no matter what we have done, no matter what roads we have been down, no matter what sins and struggles have plagued our days. Grace is grace, and oh how we need it!

But God never desires that we remain precisely where we are in life. God accepts us as we are, yes, but he also steers us always toward becoming ever closer to the people that we were created to be, toward conforming each of us to the image of his Christ.

So, what kind of “robe” should the man have been wearing? What are *we* supposed to wear once we’ve accepted the invitation to the banquet?

Listen to what the Apostle says in Colossians 3:12-14:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

These are the appropriate clothes for the banquet of the king. These are the virtues that we are to always be “putting on” at the party. This is what the banquet is held to celebrate!

This is not about earning salvation. It’s not as though Jesus is saying, you’re all invited to the party, but once you’re in you have to *prove* that you deserved the invitation in the first place!

Rather, it is about becoming the sort of people that the king desires. It is about recognizing that the banquet is being held in celebration of a very particular king and a very particular kind of kingdom.

If we don’t care about any of this—if we think the party is mostly about us—then the king can rightly say to us,

This isn’t that kind of party. If you don’t care about what kind of celebration this is, if you have little interest in the host and his desires, if your main concern is yourself and doing with the invitation what you please, then your own actions have demonstrated that this is not the party for you.

And so, finally, we come to thanksgiving.

This week, we are extended an invitation. Not a command or a list of duties. Not an agenda of moral duties to fulfill. Rather, an invitation to a feast, a lavish celebration, much like many of us will enjoy later this weekend or have already enjoyed.

An invitation to become the kind of people that we were created to be, the kind of people who bring the king glory and who draw others into the banquet.

We are invited, I think, to be people of deep and settled gratitude toward the king.

Think about it: would the wedding guests have refused the invitation to the banquet if their lives and dispositions were permeated with thanksgiving?

Would the tenants of the vineyard have refused the landowner if they were living lives of gratitude for the privilege of tending the vineyard and producing fruit?

Thanksgiving is incompatible with:

- Hoarding gifts for ourselves in the vineyard
- Obsessing about ourselves at a party in honour of another
- Seeking to protect and preserve our imagined privileges as God's children

Thanksgiving is a kind of inoculant against so many of the fears and anxieties and selfishness that shows up in these parables.

Grateful people are people who, more often than not, are willing to grow, to learn, to *change*.

They recognize that they are not self-made people, but the beneficiaries of invitations unexpected and undeserved, the recipients of gifts unearned.

This Thanksgiving, my prayer is that we would all realize—some of us, perhaps for the first time, some of us for the thousandth—that we have been invited to a grand party.

The table has been set.

The banquet is ready.

The party is waiting for our acceptance of the invitation *and* our participation in the celebration.

I want to close with excerpts from a prayer in Walter Brueggemann's *Prayers for a Privileged People*. It is called "A Thousand Glad Answers":

*You speak words of promise,
and we answer.*

*A thousand times we answer,
in a thousand tongues—
we answer in hymns of praise,
we answer in songs of thanksgiving,
we answer in lyrics of gladness...*

***We answer and draw close to you.
And in answering we are changed:
given freedom,
come to truth,
bound in obedience.***

*We answer and are yours, all yours
not our own,
yours, and
glad that we belong to
you our faithful savior.*

Amen.

