

Not a Parable for Sunday School
Matthew 22: 1-14

I have a confession to make. When I read the gospel passage for the first time this week, I found I did not like this parable. The temptation to avoid it in today's service was strong. One commentary I read went beyond calling it a difficult parable to use to proclaim God's message to us. Instead it was described as an ugly parable which should not be preached. Another commentator said that it was appropriate only for mature Christians. Quite frankly I am not sure what he meant, except I agree that it is one which would not be used as a children's Sunday school lesson because of the violence described. In the group of pastors with whom I meet weekly only one other was considering preaching on it, another one was going to possibly preach on the parable but was going to use the reading as it is found in Luke's gospel chapter 14: 16-24 if he did. Somehow I think that substitution has been the route taken in most of my history sitting in the congregation—the use of Luke's version about the guests invited to the banquet. That version is the one I know and remember. It is much shorter and lacks the details which make the parable as found in Matthew so unpleasant, those details which imply judgment. But because there are those unpleasant elements found in Matthew's version we need to think about how it might change the message; we need to try to understand how it is the same and how and why it differs from Luke's narration. To discern what it might have to say to us, we need to understand two different historical contexts which apply to this parable. Obviously, the first context which we need to think about is the place the parable has in the story of Jesus' ministry. Since despite the way we often read the words attributed to Jesus as though there was a reporter or transcriber present making a recording that was how the teachings became known. In fact, the teachings of Jesus were transmitted orally for almost 50 years before written accounts were begun. Matthew was probably the second gospel account written. And it was written at a time when the internal divisions or sects within Judaism were in the midst of a family squabble about Jesus' identity. They were also seeking an explanation for the destruction of the second Temple and Jerusalem, God's home and city, by the Romans. These factors impacted the gentile author of Luke in a different manner than the Jewish author of Matthew. At one level, the guests invited to the banquet, whether we are reading from

Matthew or from Luke, can seem to represent the Jewish people since they were the people first chosen by God to form a covenant relationship, in other words, the first ones invited to the banquet. Like the parable entitled the wicked tenants which we considered last week, this parable is told by Jesus to those chief priests and Pharisees in the Temple courtyard. Jesus is speaking to those leaders whose opposition to his ministry will place him on the cross. Jesus is again issuing an indictment against them. This indictment is not against all the people of Israel as has it has often been used by those wishing to justify anti-Semitism. Jesus was Jewish, as was the writer of Matthew. The indictment was against those who refused to recognize who Jesus was. When Matthew wrote this account of the life and teachings of Jesus, he wrote it with the understanding that Jesus, a Jew, had come to fulfill Jewish prophetic expectations. Matthew did not view himself as being anything other than a faithful Jew. Matthew pictured this indictment as referring to those other groups of the Jewish tradition who did not understand that Jesus was the expected Messiah. Although both gospels speak of a banquet and invitations, Matthew's version exaggerates the particulars. In Luke, someone gives a great dinner and invites many to come. In Matthew the setting becomes a wedding banquet given by the king for his son. From the very beginning in Matthew it is harder to picture guests who would fail to show up. After all, who would refuse a royal invitation to an important function? A dinner invitation, even today does not carry the same importance as an invitation to a wedding reception which is an important event. And although we don't have royalty, an invitation to an event given by someone of importance would not be as casually treated as it seems this invitation by the king to his son's wedding banquet is being viewed. By these added details, Matthew is indicating to his audience how very misguided are those who persist in refusing the invitation to join those who follow Jesus. It is also a measure of how much this division within Judaism distresses him. In both accounts, this invitation is treated rather casually by those who have received it. Instead of prompt acceptance and attendance, the ones sent to gather the guests are given excuses instead. No one comes to the party. In Luke, the invited guests instead of coming prefer to go about rather routine tasks related to their daily lives—inspecting new purchases or staying home with a new spouse. This non attendance makes the dinner giver angry and he then sends his servants out to recruit guests from the

general population on the streets, specifying the invitation is to include the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. The servants are to keep bringing in the people off the streets until there is no more room at the table. We tend to like this image—and those latter invitees are those to whom Jesus ministered during his life here on earth. It paints a picture of an abundant and generous offering given to all who would accept the invitation no matter their life situation. It is certainly not hard to find the good news message in Luke's revised dinner guest list. But that is not exactly the image we get from Matthew's account. When the king's servants first go out to call the invited guests, the passage reads simply: "they would not come." Quite frankly, the image of subjects bluntly refusing an invitation from their king seems rather daring on their part if we think about the usual behavior of an insulted king. But the king does not get angry at this refusal. Instead he sends the servants back out to the same invited guests with descriptions of how fantastic the wedding banquet they have been invited to attend is going to be. At this point, Matthew's king seems to be more generous toward his invited guests than Luke's dinner giver. The king really wants these people to attend and so urges them to come. This resembles the vineyard owner in last week's parable who sent representatives more than once to collect what was due. A second time the servants go to the invited guests. Some of them receive the same excuses that were given in Luke. People are too busy going about their own business to be bothered to join the king's wedding banquet. But not all of the invited guests just tender excuses. Some resort to violence and kill the messengers who returned with the king's message urging their attendance. This violence toward the royal servants is not received well. The king is now enraged and send troops out to destroy those "murderers and burn their city." Throughout Matthew's gospel there is an emphasis that God's grace does not cancel the reality of judgment. The failure of those who were supposed to guide the people, their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah would surely bring about a judgment upon them. The Jewish Wars which were the result of an uprising of the people against Roman rule brought about a crushing defeat in 70 AD. The destruction of the Second Temple and the city of Jerusalem was a recent event at the time of the writing of Matthew's gospel. To these early Jewish followers of Jesus it would be seen as a righteous judgment for the failures of their chief priests and Pharisees. Luke and his audience would not have made this connection. Again, the

experience of both the writer and those who listened to him would influence the interpretation of what they received as Jesus' teaching. What remains the same in these two parables at this point is that the feast prepared is still being served, just to a different group of guests. In Matthew's parable servants are also sent out into the streets to gather guests, everyone who is found is invited so that the wedding hall is filled with guests. Here again, Matthew and Luke differ in their descriptions of these guests brought in off the streets. Luke describes them as including the poor and those with physical problems; Matthew describes them as both the good and the bad. Luke ends the parable with the filling of the house, Matthew does not. Matthew adds the detail of a guest who is present wearing inappropriate garments. The king approaches him with the question: "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" What in the world is this addition about? In fact, how would any guests invited off the streets have appropriate attire for a royal wedding? Again we find Matthew taking things to such an extreme that we become incredulous. The guest is speechless when questioned and is then thrown out, not just of the banquet hall, but into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. What happened to the generosity of the invitation to all, both good and bad? Matthew is warning his community against self-satisfaction. They have accepted the invitation and are invited guests to God's abundant feast, but they must nevertheless be on guard against the complacency shown by the first invited guests; against becoming legalistic and refusing to see how God is opening doors to the kingdom. The doors of the kingdom community have been thrown wide open, and the invitation extended literally to all. But once you enter as a guest, there are things expected of you. You can't go on acting like you have not been the beneficiary of an extraordinary invitation. The other guests now occupying the banquet hall have been transformed in some way as symbolized by their garments. This one guest seemed to accept the invitation but was not changed in any way. Matthew ends the parable with this verse: "For many are called, but few are chosen." Matthew understood that God's invitation, through Christ was to everyone. There was no one excluded. However, acceptance of the invitation is accompanied by a change in the life of the ones called. They must bear the good fruit of justice and compassion, of love for God and others shown by their way of life.

After living with this parable for a week, I have finally decided that there is a good news message for us, even in Matthew's text. For despite everything that happens, the banquet to which guests were invited was held. God's invitation to all remained intact. There is an acknowledgment that there will be judgment for disobedience to God's will, but those who accept the invitation are transformed and made welcome at the Table. In many ways the message is the same as it always has been and will be forevermore: God's steadfast love endures forever. God reaches out again and again to humanity, desiring to bring us into the kingdom, offering us an abundant feast, expecting that we will move toward actually being the creature originally designed in God's image. We can only rejoice and offer praise for God's sending of Christ and the Holy Spirit which makes this path possible. Amen.

***Charge**

As we walk out into the world, our charge is to hold fast to the marvelous knowledge that we have received invitations to God's banquet. Knowing we have been called into the body whose head is Christ we are seek to do God's will and praise the name of the Lord by living faithful lives of discipleship. This means that while we may be confident of our invitations, we cannot be complacent about keeping our minds and hearts open to the new things which God is doing among us.