

## Parables—from dark to ugly

It should come as no surprise that this year has been the year when the lectionary's gospel focus is on Matthew, one of the three so called synoptic gospels which tell us of Jesus' life, death and resurrection—but also convey to us what Jesus taught to those who came to hear him and be healed by him. These gospels are called synoptic because many of the actions and teachings found within them seem very similar. Usually the details between the stories found in more than one account vary only in minor details—or perhaps in their placement within the overall narrative. When we considered the parable of the wicked tenants last week, we saw that the ending suggested by the Pharisees to whom Jesus had told the story was violent and dark. We usually assume the parables told by Jesus are there to tell us about the kingdom of God and how it works. We don't expect violence and darkness in those comparisons. Often when we encounter passages like today's we try to explain them away instead of looking carefully at all that they might be saying. When we looked at the one last week, the events described seemed to fit better a description of the kingdom of the present—the kingdom ruled by the Empire, not the promised kingdom of God. When Jesus began that story, although he used images which traditionally are associated with God, he did not tell them that what he was saying was about the kingdom of God. Instead, he just began telling this story about disobedient-wicked tenants, then asking the Pharisees what their fate would be. That this parable is more likely about the world we inhabit than the fulfilled reign of God is an important factor in understanding last week's text. Today's parable immediately follows and is addressed to the same audience. If you examine this text in a reference book which aligns the parallel verses of the synoptic gospels, there is a close parallel for it in the gospel of Luke. This parable as narrated in Luke's gospel, in some ways has the same premise. There is a great feast, invitations have been delivered only to be rejected. The host is determined to fill his hall so unlikely guests are then invited to come and take a place at the table. This is found in Luke 14: 15-24 and is there called the parable of the great dinner. Yet when introducing this parable's narrative which goes beyond the darkness of the Pharisee's judgment of those tenants into an ugly series of violent acts, Jesus says: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son". In Luke, the parable is told with a rejection followed by an expanded guest list, but no violence. Luke places it in the context of Jesus' wandering route toward Jerusalem. We have been told that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there, but it is still some time and distance away. In fact, it seems that the occasion for this story is while he is a guest for dinner in the home of "a leader of the Pharisees." However, Matthew places this parable at a much different time and in a different setting. This is the third parable that Jesus tells the chief priests and elders in the Temple courtyard the week when he will be arrested and tried. This placement of the parable may have influenced the dark tone we find. In this placement, and in the context of Matthew's congregation, it was a dark time. In this parable we get a glimpse of the low point in an intense family feud—those who accepted and followed Jesus were being rejected and cast out of their synagogues because of their belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Again, this pain was real but unfortunately it has left a residue which has justified anti-Semitism. In this form we still have to admit that this is an ugly parable. No amount of generalization about God's open welcome—God's hospitality in issuing the invitations is going to do away with that fact. In fact, attempting to do that seems as huge

mistake as it glosses over the serious nature and creates that inherent danger which leads to hatred of a group. Taken just as it is told, this parable is just odd—the characters are bizarre. According to Matthew, the party is for the wedding of the king's son—now really, who is going to refuse to attend the wedding of the king's son? The king, sends out a second invitation to these invitees describing the delights awaiting them at the party—but again the invitations are not accepted—and although that seems unusual—parables are like that. Then the story gets even wilder as the king's servants are seized, abused and murdered. Up until this point, this resembles the previous parable. The king-God-has a son-Jesus. The king has sent servants-prophets-several times with invitations to the wedding feast—the coming of the kingdom. But they kill the servants-prophets. The symbolism of this as allegory is clear. So far, so good with making sense of the story. However, as the story continues, the king in the parable retaliates—he goes to war against his own people, but the dinner is still happening for those other guests. In the context of the first century believers—they were trying to understand the reality of their day—the Messiah had been put to death by Rome with collaboration from Temple religious leaders; Rome had destroyed the Temple; and the Messiah they accepted was being rejected in the synagogues. Matthew's congregation with its Jewish heritage would have seen the destruction of the Temple as God's wrath and judgment on those who rejected Jesus and the inclusion of those deemed unacceptable by those religious leaders as the guest now seated at the banquet table. Those early believers were confronted with the unsettling reality that Jesus was still being rejected by some of their fellow Israelites. Their question was how did they make sense of that in the context of the larger scriptural story and what was their role in this continuation of God's relationship with them. In some ways, there is no “new” or special message which can be gained from this parable that cannot be found in Luke's narrative. But there is good news—even in the midst of this ugly parable. Despite the violence which erupts—the banquet is held. Invitations are extended so that everyone is gathered and brought to the wedding hall—both the good and the bad. The lesson there is as a guest at this banquet, there is a radical acceptance offered. It doesn't matter who we are or what we've done—both good and bad are asked to come and sit at the table. We have done nothing to earn, achieve or deserve this place, but have been gathered through God's desire for us to be there. The catch is that although we have been given this place, so has everyone else. And that means we don't get to choose with whom we sit. As we are radically and graciously accepted, so we too are called to radically and graciously accept those other undeserving guests at the table. Accepting God's invitation means that we are challenged to change our ideas about those whom we see as other. This is where the last part of the parable seems to make a statement. When the guests are brought in off the streets there is no mention of them being garbed in different clothes before they are admitted. Yet when the king comes in to survey his full hall of guest, he notices a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe. That man is ejected from the gathering. There is a temptation to view this as an indication that not all are welcome. But what if the acceptance of the invitation and willingness to sit with the other guests is the key to being robed in wedding garments? Could it be that having accepted the invitation to come, the man's ideas about others did not change? Perhaps his failure to be clothed as were the other guests was due to his failure to be changed to reflect the values and priorities of God's reign. We only truly find our place at God's table when we are willing to have our attitudes changed, when we are humble and grateful enough for the invitation to give up our prejudices, our

stereotyping, our legalism, our judgment and our exclusion of others to we become agents of God's grace and love. While the element of judgment within this parable cannot be overlooked—it also cannot be overlooked that the wedding banquet does occur in spite of rejections. God is still the host of the banquet. God continues to issue invitations to come to the banquet provided. Thanks be to God.