

Grace in a Wedding Banquet Gone Wrong

In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm so glad you all could make it for worship today. We are thankful that we can gather today after Hurricane Isaias, and also in prayer for those who have lost so much from the storm. Our rector Jim and Katharine are in Barcelona, Spain, and will be heading down the coast toward the Mediterranean tomorrow. Jim asked me several weeks ago if I would be able to sub for him during his two week absence. What I didn't know at the time was that I would be the priest in charge of getting this place ready for a hurricane. I also didn't know what the gospel reading would be for today. In my sermons I usually try to develop a message—a core affirmation statement—based upon the scripture for the day. The gospel today—the one you just heard about the wedding banquet gone wrong—is a tough one to understand, and a challenge for preaching. I think maybe I should have chosen Psalm 23 to preach about—that would be a lot easier. Nonetheless I want to give it a try. And my message has something to do with grace.

For a little context: By now in Matthew's gospel Jesus is near his wit's end. He has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He knows what awaits him. Shortly thereafter he walks into the Temple, where instead of finding prayerful people in worship he finds moneychangers and people selling doves, con artists trying to "make a deal, to make a buck." He angrily throws over the tables and chairs, coins flying everywhere. He says "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." The religious leaders are furious with him. It is in this context that he then tells three parables, all directed at the chief priests and elders, the religious leaders who are questioning his authority and also trying to trap him so that they can have him killed. The first parable is about the two sons and the father who asks them to work in his vineyard. The first son tells his father that he will not work in the vineyard but later does so. The second son tells his father that he will work for him but does not. "Which of the two did the will of his father?" he asks. His point is that the son who acts like he is doing God's will but does not actually do it represents the very chief priests who are

harassing him. You heard the second parable last week, the allegory about the vineyard and the wicked tenants. Again, the tenants in the story are the religious leaders Jesus is talking to. They are rejecting God, not serving God's people. What you just heard today is the last of those three parables. It is also an allegory, about the wedding feast, also known as the Great Supper. It too is about how and why the religious leaders Jesus is talking to will never see God's Kingdom. It's a bizarre story and a difficult parable to understand, so let's take a look at it. Here are the difficult parts in a nutshell: a king's invitation to a wedding banquet that is rejected by everyone he invites; his multiple attempts to entice them to attend; mistreatment and murder of his servants by the invited guests; his violent and excessive punishment including murder; opening up the banquet to anyone and everyone; and the violent expulsion of a guest whose attire the king deemed improper. We are understandably confused by this series of events and by the behavior of the characters in the parable. The King's invitation to come to the feast in honor of the King's son is rejected. We watch in horror as the servants sent by the king to announce the party are seized and murdered. The story is getting even more bizarre. The King retaliates by going to war against his own people. Enraged, he unleashes an army, and before we know it the murderers themselves are murdered—at the King's command no less. The city, presumably the King's own city, is now a pile of smoldering ash. But let's keep going. It gets weirder still. Now the King invites everyone he can find, nobody excluded: to the commoners on the streets, the unhoused, the unkempt women and old men dressed in rags—everybody. And they do come. But now the final kicker: the King enters the ballroom and finds one guy who is not wearing a wedding robe—is not dressed “appropriately,” so he has his attendants “bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness.” “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Wow! What can we make of that?

The parable is an allegory, meaning that people and objects in it represent people and objects outside of it. Most scholars have interpreted the allegory this way: The King who is throwing the grand feast—the wedding banquet—is God. The son for whom he throws the banquet is Jesus. The people he invited but who refused to

participate in God's banquet—refused to accept God's offer—are the Jewish religious leaders including those to whom Jesus is telling the parable. The man at the end of the parable who did attend the feast but was not “dressed appropriately,” and was therefore thrown out by the King, was one who had not fully bought into and celebrated God's invitation.

How are we to read this parable? How do we make sense of it? Let's look at some of the characters and their behavior now. First, the King. If he is the all inclusive God of love why did he restrict his initial invitations to the elite only, and only later offer his Kingdom to everyone? And if he is the God of peace why did he retaliate with violence and killing the people who offended him? Why would he burn down their and presumably his own city? Is God really the violent leader who ruthlessly punishes those who challenge his authority, and burns their city? And who in the end mistreats even those who attend the banquet, deciding that he is not worthy? Sounds more like a mean and venomous ruler, doesn't it? Reminds me more of the Biblical depiction of Herod. Seen in this context this depiction of God as angry and violent who ruthlessly punishes others could condone violence and murder by any ruler, and further using this parable would give such a ruler Biblical justification for such behavior. Attributing characteristics like this to God can become an excuse for making violence normal and acceptable and is at times used to give our own rulers permission to condone and use violence. By extension it is also a means of allowing ourselves to be violent—through words or deeds—toward our neighbors and others who are not like us. And what about the people who kill the King's servants when they come with the second invitation? So much violence, so much killing in this story!

Enough! Where do we go to find a message here? And there is a message, despite the difficulty in deciding who represents who in the parable. First, we have to remember that the literary genre of allegory is often at odds with reality. It is story. It is theatre. Matthew—or whoever wrote this gospel—is using hyperbole here, and is using Jesus to declare a message about joining his ministry, about entering the Kingdom, and as we will see also about judgment. Surely the message of this parable—and of the other two we just mentioned—was clearly received by the religious leaders to

whom Jesus was speaking. But no, we don't have to accept the interpretation that the King here is God. It's just hard to explain a lot of things we read in scripture. That's why scholars have disagreed about the meaning of many things in the Bible. The bigger message, beyond the bizarre events in the parable, is that Jesus is offering them and us today a different way to live, a life in the Kingdom, a life Jesus describes so clearly in his Sermon on the Mount, a life where all are invited to enter. It is by grace and mercy that we can enter in. And if we say "yes" then it doesn't matter whether or not we are dressed in the "wedding robe" of this parable. We won't be thrown into the darkness.

Robert Farrar Capon was an Episcopal priest and freelance author. He wrote three books about the parables of Jesus: *The Parables of the Kingdom*, *the Parables of Grace*, and *the Parables of Judgment*. He classifies the three parables I just mentioned as *Parables of Judgment*. I don't talk about judgment much. It's not my favorite topic, but we definitely see it throughout scripture. The way I see it, very simply, is that our actions have consequences. Therein is the judgment. We definitely see it in our parable today, and elsewhere in scripture. There is the final judgment that the Bible portrays at the End Times that we read about in Malachi and elsewhere in the Jewish Bible; and the Judgment of the Nations that Jesus describes, when we will be separated into the sheep and the goats. But regardless of how you read and interpret these Biblical depictions of judgment, it is within our life experiences that we see judgment at work.

Capon goes on to say about this parable of the Wedding Feast that it is not only judgment and punishment that we see. There is also grace and mercy. We see grace and we see mercy in the offering of Jesus to accept in faith his message about entering the Kingdom, to say "yes" to that offer, to choose to live the Kingdom life. The ending of the parable "Many are called, but few are chosen" seems harsh, but I read it to mean that the doors into the Kingdom are wide open, yet sadly few choose to enter in. It is not about election, not about God choosing some but excluding others. It is about us—about whether or not we will enter in. That is grace.

I love the way Capon ends his chapter about this parable. He compares the grace of Jesus' offer to life in the Kingdom to that of a car salesman with an offer to a potential buyer—that would be each of us. Imagine this scene: “You really want a car?” the salesman whispers in our ear. “Come around to the back of the lot. Have I got a deal for you!” And back there is a brand new Porsche (or Mercedes or Jaguar—take your pick). “It’s yours for free,” he says. “The boss just likes you; here are the keys.” Many are called: there is no one in the whole world—good, bad, or indifferent—who hasn’t been led around to the back of the lot by the divine Salesman and offered heaven for nothing. But few are chosen: because you know what most of us do? First thing—before we so much as let ourselves sink into the leather upholstery or listen to the engine purr—we get suspicious. We say to ourselves: “This is too good to be true.” We walk around the car and kick the tires. We slam the doors. We jump up and down on the bumpers to test the shocks. And then, even if we do decide to take it, we start worrying about the warranty, fussing about the cost of insuring such an expensive car, and even—God help us—fuming about whether if our no-good neighbor came in here he might be offered a Rolls Royce. But God doesn’t step in to help us close the deal—at least not with the usual salesman routine. God just sits up there in the front office and remains Mr. Giveaway, the Crazy Eddy of Eternity whose prices are insane. God gives God’s self to absolutely everybody: no money down, no interest, no payments. The only catch is, you have to be as crazy as God to take the deal, because your every instinct will be to distrust such a cockamammy arrangement.

And all you have to do is say “yes” to this crazy offer. Nothing else is required. And there is no judgment here. This is pure grace!

Rev. Bob Donnell