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Matthew 22:1-14

“One Body, Many Members, Part 2”

Last Sunday on World Communion Sunday, I talked about how there is unity in Christ despite the differences that exist among us. And I talked about how we need each other; how we need diversity in the body of Christ, the church universal; and that we need to reach beyond the walls that divide us; and affirm, trust and live into the unity that is ours in Christ despite the differences that exist among us.

Which sounds great. Let’s all stand in a circle and hold hands and sing Kum-by-yah . . .

Except it’s not that easy. We know that. As I said last week, we see people everywhere we look struggling to live with differences. On Friday, as I was writing this sermon, I received a ton of e-mails about this weekend’s Ferguson October event: prayer vigils and marches and peaceful protests, all of which attest to the fact that we don’t all get along; that differences are hard to live with. And now with the unrest in the Shaw neighborhood? I don’t have an easy answer . . . I don’t think there is an easy answer!

(And) Today in this weird, bizarre, violent parable from Matthew we get a glimpse of how Matthew thinks we should resolve our differences – but it’s not very helpful. In this story we observe an intense family feud Matthew’s community is having with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to God and, in particular, whether Jesus was the promised Messiah. Matthew’s community said yes; the Jewish community said no; real differences existed between the two groups; and sometimes these two groups split families and friends into factions. And what Matthew seems to be saying here to his Israelite kin, his Jewish brothers and sisters, is that if you reject Jesus as the Messiah, God rejects you.

This is painful stuff – roots of anti-Semitism are in this parable – it has a dark history. Martin Luther once called this parable “the terrible Gospel on which I hate to preach”. And I can understand why. But it is the Word of God as it comes to us today.

So as Jesus said, there once was a king who prepared a royal banquet for his son's wedding. After the elaborate preparations were made, he sent out the invitations to an A-list of guests.

But shockingly, some people rejected the king's invitation. Jesus says that some people "refused to come." Others "paid no attention." Another group even killed the king's messengers. Such responses, Jesus said, showed that these people "did not deserve to come" (22:8).

So, after that, a second round of invitations went out, and a B-list of guests accept. After all, if the privileged people refuse his generosity, then the King would extend it to "all the people his servants could find." So at long last the guest hall was full. But something happened between the rejected invitations and the full house – the King sent his troops to destroy the people he had invited and he ordered those troops to burn the city.

Now, before we go any further with the rest of the story, what are we going to do with this story, we who live in a very diverse religious world and who are not the types to condemn people who believe differently than we do? What are we going to do with it, this Word of God as it comes to us today?

We can begin with the Good News that God invites everyone, everyone, the good and the bad, to the wedding banquet, because God is a God of expansive love and radical inclusiveness. We can also see just how far God will go to issue the invitation. That's the Good News in the story.

But as I said, some of this story is difficult news and we can't ignore it. This story was used by Matthew to condemn his Jewish brothers and sisters and has been used to fuel the fire of anti-Semitism. I don't think that's what Matthew intended to happen when he wrote this story; nor do I think for a minute that Jesus would want his parable to be interpreted as such. We also can't dismiss that fact that we're not the small community Matthew's was arguing with the synagogue down the street. Christianity is now a global religion, and we live in a small world, where religious differences are used to fuel too many fires, whether it's Christians against Jews or Jews against Muslims or Muslims against Christians, the world has enough people who condemn others for their differences and burn cities because of it. So the last thing we should do is use this passage to condemn people.

As I struggled with what then to say about this parable I was, ironically, reminded of the prayer for illumination in our wedding liturgy which says, “O God, amidst all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal word that does not change.” I’ve often stumbled over that prayer, thinking to myself, “But doesn’t God’s word change? How can I say it doesn’t, when I’m up here officiating and for most of the church’s history, I wasn’t allowed to do that!” So I struggled with that prayer.

Until I realized, after praying it so many times, that maybe God’s word doesn’t change. Instead, what changes, is our interpretation of it. Slowly but surely, because of the persistence of the Holy Spirit, how we read and interpret God’s word changes, so today when we read this story, we can see that condemnation is not in keeping with God’s inclusive nature, nor is it our place to judge. God alone is Judge and Redeemer.

But still, there’s that nagging question of how to deal with differences. And for the answer to that question, I think the second part of this parable might be helpful. You know, the part about the one guest who stood out like a sore thumb. The party crasher who dressed like a slob — to the wedding party of the king’s son, the prince! In the royal palace! What was he thinking?! How could anyone be so cavalier? Would you wear your gym clothes to a royal wedding, or any wedding for that matter? Hopefully not; and if you did, you’d probably get kicked out, too.

I think what’s happening here is that Matthew warns his community against too much self-satisfaction and smugness. This king is no pushover, and if the new guests are beneficiaries of an unexpectedly generous invitation, they must nevertheless be on guard against the complacency shown by the first invitees. The doors of the kingdom community **are thrown** wide open, and the invitation extends literally **to all**. But once you come in, there are standards. You can’t go on acting like you’re not at an extraordinary party.

One of the things we sometimes forget is that while God loves us all, no exceptions, that does not mean the acceptance comes without expectations, otherwise acceptance becomes meaningless. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that grace is not a refuge from obedience, but an invitation to transformation. That grace, in the words of the writer of Ephesians: “equips us with every good thing by developing in us what pleases God through Jesus Christ.”

You see, the poor guy who got bounced from the king's wedding banquet figured there wasn't anything expected of him. He assumed that all he needed to do was show-up. In the church, using the words of Bonhoeffer, we call this "cheap grace".

There's a fine line between accepting everyone's differences and condoning all behavior. Apparently, Matthew's church had gotten the two blurred. People who tend to wallow in grace and think nothing is expected of them may be surprised by the king's question, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"

Because there are expectations for how we will behave. Whether we are the guest, the king, or the person who's been unexpectedly invited, there are expectations.

And so, while we are called to work through our differences so that we can be the one body of Christ we are called to be, we also have to recognize that change in behavior is expected once we accept the invitation to the party.

It reminds me of what someone once said, that while I like to say that God loves me as I am, and I believe that to be true, I also have to admit that God calls me, and us, to new life, and that call is a call to change, to transform, and to be the people God wants us to be, hopes for us to be, and expects us to be.

Several years ago in Atlanta, Georgia, there was a terrific power wedding scheduled in a suburban church. A wealthy debutante was engaged to marry an equally wealthy businessman, and a lavish reception was to follow. Just hours before the wedding, the groom got cold feet; he left his bride – literally – standing alone at the altar. The wedding, of course, was cancelled. But what would they do with all that food? It had already been paid for and prepared. The Atlanta Constitution reported that buses were sent to the Salvation Army and several downtown shelters, and they brought all those people to the country club, where they sampled fresh crab and lobster, and steamed baby carrots well into the night.

Friends, that is us; we who have no reason to think that the King should have anything to do with us. But God has invited us to a party, and it is totally free and undeserved. And God wants us to rejoice and be glad.

But God, who has invited us to this party; and invites us to come as we are, loves us too much to leave us as we are. God wants to change us, to mold us and make us into honest to goodness children of a king. It's a process; a journey that happens over time, but certainly, it begins with grace.

To treat that gift of grace so lightly is to dabble in the "cheap grace" of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. But to leave this party every week, asking God to go with us into the messy chapters of our lives, and to lead us on a journey toward righteousness; that is the ultimate purpose of this parable.

May God give us courage to see ourselves in this story, and faith to receive God's grace with joy. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Gospel of Matthew commentary and Year A, Volume 4 commentary.

www.workingpreacher.org, commentary for Matthew 22: 1-14, 2014

Journey with Jesus, reflections on this parable

http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/NT/01-Matt/Matt_22.01-14-TerribleParable-Molin.htm