

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 15, 2017
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Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Grace Beyond Hope or Imagining

The king is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a wedding banquet. And a wedding is supposed to be an occasion of joy, love, and celebration. But—in an almost Game of Thrones-like fashion—the wedding in this parable does not go according to plan. Death, arson, and exile overshadow what is supposed to be a happy occasion.

When we hear this parable, it can sound like the Kingdom of Heaven is ruled by a king who burns cities down to cinders when he is dishonored and who hogties his houseguests for dress code violations. Any kingdom ruled by a sovereign so capricious seems far from heavenly.

And yet... The king is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

As St. Matthew records this parable of Jesus, he is trying to make sense of his own time. The king, of course, is God and the wedding banquet for the son is the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. The original guests invited to this party are none other than the people of Israel—God's chosen people.

You see, Israel had agreed to come to the party, but when the day had come they disregarded the invitations of both the Hebrew prophets of old and the Christian missionaries of Matthew's own time. Some of these they even abused and killed.

But Israel's violence only begets more violence. By rejecting the peaceable Way of Jesus, Israel had subjected itself to the violence of Rome's armies. And when Jerusalem burns in AD 70, it seems like God has revoked his invitation.

And yet... The king is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

That wedding hall refuses to be left empty, so God issues a new invitation. And this one is meant for all who heed the call, both Jew and gentile. A party once opened to only a few is now open to all, regardless of their status or merit.

For Matthew, the party is the Church, but he has noticed that some of the guests have not arrived dressed for the occasion. There are some who have refused to wear a wedding robe. And these robes are none other than the good works of a person who lives according to the Way of Jesus—the apparel of a true disciple. Those trying to sneak into the party without one will eventually find themselves ejected from the party.

And yet... The King is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

By the cultural standards of Jesus' time, the conduct of the king in this parable would have been extraordinary.

In a world accustomed to a party host issuing only two invitations, God sends a third. The king is gracious.

In a world accustomed to kings punishing those who refused them, God is patient when his invitation is spurned. The king is gracious.

In a world accustomed to entire cities being exterminated for the offenses of their governors, God surrenders only the murderers within his city up to their own violence. The king is gracious.

In a world accustomed to the social elite receiving preferential treatment, God issues his invitation to those even in the streets. The king is gracious.

And in a world accustomed to kings giving their guests wedding robes at the door, God approaches those who refuse to wear what he has provided as a friend. The king is gracious.

Where you and I might see a cruel tyrant, Jesus' listeners would have seen a king of unprecedented grace. The parable may not be a perfect portrait of God, but it points us in the right direction:

The King is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

When Jesus says, "Many are called, but few are chosen," he says so standing amidst overturned tables in the temple courts of Jerusalem—the very center of all it had historically meant to belong to God's chosen people.

In the midst of God's gracious invitation-and-re-invitation, our former paradigms of election is abolished, and a new one takes their place: God chooses those who choose him. That is to say, God's election is an affirmation of our own choice; either for him or against him.

The King is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

In the parable of the wedding banquet, God is gracious every step of the way. And it is precisely because of his grace that God surrenders the religious establishment of Jerusalem up to their own spiritual coup d'état and also surrenders the false disciple up to his greater desire for the outer darkness.

If you and I get caught up in misplaced moral outrage when we see the blood-stained city burning or when we see the ill-attired guest is being expelled, we blind ourselves what is going on in the background of this parable: An untold multitude enjoying the lavished feast, adorned in elegant, white robes provided courtesy of the king.

Our modern sensibilities may initially revolt against this parable, but if we wrestle with it long enough it will eventually bless us. When we have let our knee-jerk apprehension subside, we will discover a king who is more gracious than we could ever hope for or imagine.

But how do we respond to this king of grace?

If we take seriously the call of God in our lives, then our only response is to accept the invitation and to don a wedding robe.

If you are here in this room, then you have already accepted the invitation. And we are all here. But what does it look for us like to put on a wedding robe? As St. Paul says: Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent and worthy of praise; let us put on these things. For these are the apparel of a true disciple.

And we need not worry about stitching together our own robes by our won effort. For the wedding robes are a free gift provided by God when we walk through the door. We need only choose to put them on. And God, in his grace, will affirm our choice.

Unprecedented grace.

That is what God is like.

That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

For all of us gathered here celebrating this banquet—partaking in this meal of grace—we are recipients of an undeserved invitation. Let us attend this feast as the king's welcomed guests and let us consider carefully how we might dress for the occasion. Amen.