

Parable: Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction:

The parable Jesus tells today is weird. It's just weird. First of all, it's confusing. The King in the story seems capricious at best, if not a little schizophrenic. We automatically assume the king in the parable is a stand-in for God, and because of how we view the king, we feel a little squirmy about God when we read this thing. There's mass murder, it feels like the guest is given a bait-and-switch and punished for being poor. It's just...it's just hard to see what's good, what's useful, in this story.

But I think we can understand it with a little bit of work, and beyond understanding it, I hope we can figure out some ways to have this parable make sense for us, too. Let's pray for that, and get rolling.

Prayer:

First Things:

Before we do anything else, we have to remember, first of all, that this parable wasn't written to us in this room. We know God desires to use it for our good, for our understanding and faithfulness, but Jesus was telling this to a first audience.

The only way we can make any sense of what Jesus says here is to notice what is going on around it.

What's Going On?

And what's going on in this chapter of Matthew is that Jesus is getting laid into by the Pharisees, and he's lambasting them in turn. It's just full of contention and conflict.

The day before, Jesus entered Jerusalem. He just told the Pharisees that "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." The Chief Priests and the Pharisees hear this, want to arrest him, but are too scared. He tells today's parable.

After he tells today's parable, the next sentence is "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said." From there it just gets crazy. They keep trying to trick him, he keeps making them look silly, they get angrier and angrier. Finally, at the end of Chapter 22, we read "from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions." They gave up. It's at that point Jesus really lays into them. The end of Chapter 23 comes this way:

29 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of

the prophets.’ 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

33 “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth...37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 38 Look, your house is left to you desolate.

It’s really, really important that we realize that the parable we’re talking about today comes near the beginning of this long build-up of conflict with the Pharisees, which culminates in this condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes as the progeny of murderers.

Jesus says that what's true of these folks' great-great-grandparents is true of them, too, that they'll be held accountable for the murder of God’s agents in the

past, because they're going to kill, crucify, flog, and drive out of town "prophets, sages, and teachers" that Jesus himself sends to them.

They'll just be doing what their ancestors did, and they'll get what their ancestors got, which is judgment. Jesus goes one step further after that, and bemoans Jerusalem and "its house," the Temple, which he sees as under control of these prophet-killers. He knows that because they've rejected him, Jerusalem will fall. And it did, just a few decades after his crucifixion.

How does it fit?

So we have to ask how the parable fits into these points Jesus is going to go on and make.

If last week's parable was in some real way a history of Israel up to Jesus, this parable is basically the same thing: A history of Jerusalem up to Jesus, and just a little bit beyond him.

The parable summarizes what's already happened and what Jesus knows will come to pass in just a little while for both Jerusalem and those "prophets, sages, and teachers" that Jerusalem chews up.

vv1-7: Reading Through

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 2

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

4 “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

5 “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. 6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

vv1-7: A Sketch of Right Now & Soon:

Let's start here. This is a parable about Jesus' own interaction with the Pharisees, Scribes, and religious elite of Jerusalem. It's a parable that points to Jerusalem's inevitable demolition, and the end of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, who have been persecutors of Jesus and those God will send after him.

vv1-7: Jesus' Entry as a Wedding Banquet:

Remember, only yesterday as Matthew frames it, Jesus entered Jerusalem. He is, as we know, the Son--Son of

God, Son of Man, Son of David. Kings, in these parables, almost always does stand for God.

And Jesus' Palm Sunday, "triumphal entry" really was, to some, triumphant. It was something like a wedding banquet--a celebration, a party, an affirmation of the great thing that has happened.

vv1-7: A refusal you can't make, (but the religious elite did)

Of course, during Jesus' day, to refuse an invitation to a wedding party was nearly impossible. It wasn't done. You had to go.

And you especially had to go if the King invited you, right? For a king to invite you to his son's wedding, and you to say no, would be unthinkable. It was an obligation. And it should have been something like an obligation for all of Jerusalem, especially its religious elite, to welcome the Messiah who they'd been waiting for.

But Jesus wasn't welcomed by any of these religious elites, in fact, they couldn't believe he let the crowds praise him as "the Son of David," the Messiah; they wanted to shut him up and shut him down.

In Jesus' parable, "The king was enraged" at the refusal of those he invited. This may seem like an over-reaction to us, but to refuse was something like

claiming equal status with the King, implying they had a choice when they didn't really. It was treasonous, disloyal: A thing that you couldn't do. They weren't the king. To say they wouldn't come is to make themselves equal. And the king in the parable was enraged that some of the invitees actually killed the servants he sent to invite them to the party. As far as plot goes, that's just crazy: Why would they do that? But they do. And so, in the parable, "[The King] sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."

If the start of the parable was a sketch of what happened just a day ago, when Jesus finally arrived in Jerusalem, the end of this parable seems to be a sketch of what Jesus says will come to pass.

Remember, Chapters 21, 22, 23 build and build on each other, Jesus railing against the Pharisees over and over, until he prophesies that Jerusalem's house--the Temple--is "left to Jerusalem desolate." In fact, a couple of verses into Chapter 24, Jesus tells his disciples plainly that all the stones of the Temple will be thrown down. We know Jerusalem itself was ransacked and destroyed, it's inhabitants scattered, in 70 AD, less than 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has already called the Pharisees "murderers," and foresees how the religious elite will murder those who follow after Jesus. Paul, who wrote half the New Testament, was one of these, acting as a coat-check while Stephen was stoned, chasing down

Jesus' followers just like Jesus says people will do.

What we realize is that just like last week's parable was a sort-of history of Israel up to the point Jesus showed up, the first half of today's parable, is simply a summary of what already has happened and what Jesus knows will come to pass in just a little while, for both Jerusalem and those "prophets, sages, and teachers" that Jerusalem chews up.

But the parable doesn't end here, right? Jesus continues. And he says things we'd expect him to say, really.

vv8-10: Things We'd Expect To Hear

8 "Then [the king] said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. 9 So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' 10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

So somehow, despite an army invasion, the banquet's still nice and fresh. It is "just" a parable, right?

This part of the parable should remind us of what we've seen Jesus say, even last week, about the way

the “invitation” about the Kingdom of God is going to those who no one, especially not the Pharisees, Scribes, or Chief Priests would have thought--the poor and oppressed, the sinning and shamed, outsiders and unreligious. They're showing up. This is what's happening around Jesus, and what will continue to happen in the future. But it's as Jesus continues that I find myself most uncomfortable.

vv11-14: God

He says,

11 “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 12 He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

13 “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

14 “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

So the king has invited in all sorts of people, and he walks into the banquet for his son, and there’s a guy there in informal clothes, the clothes he was wearing when he was invited.

Because the man isn't wearing formal wedding clothes, the king--and a king can do whatever a king wants, of course--just tosses him "outside," an "outside" that is described in apocalyptic ways that are used elsewhere to describe the judgment facing those who reject God's invitation in Jesus.

And of course, we can't help but continue to connect this king character with God, which makes God seem...unfair at best. Capricious and heartless at worst. Honestly, for me, there's nothing worse than thinking that God might be capricious, might be given to unexpected changes of mood, might do things suddenly, without any reason. An all-powerful baby is the worst thing I can imagine.

So let's make sense of this.

vv11-14: Making Sense

Remember, the invitation to celebrate with the King over his Son goes out to all those people who haven't already rejected it. "Good and bad," as the parable puts it.

But there seems to be something the King expects of those who receive the invitation. He expects them to honor him as he has honored them, to show up appropriately dressed. He expects those who he's invited to treat the invitation as the honor it is, and respect the host who has invited them.

To not do this is, ultimately, to be un-invited. You end up with those who rejected the invitation to begin with. You end up left out of the party.

What Jesus seems to be communicating is something that's as relevant for us now as it was then. And this is great, because in some real ways, most of this parable doesn't fit us this side of Jerusalem's fall. It's just not for us. But this last part of it really can be, I think.

While the invitation to be a citizen in God's Kingdom is open for everyone, if we're going to accept it, it demands things from us.

God's Kingdom is open to all, to good and bad, but if we're going to accept God's invitation to join, to be a part of what God is doing in Jesus, and celebrate the Son, then there are things that are demanded of us.

This isn't earth-shattering. This isn't a surprise. We who follow Jesus realize that to follow him demands something of us.

vv11-14: Broad & Narrow:

I think we get hung up on the last line, the "point" the parable is supposed to make: "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

We get the first part: Many are invited into what Jesus

is doing. As far as this parable goes, and other Scripture affirms it, “Good and Bad” are invited, anyone is welcome, really...except, it seems, these Pharisees and religious elite who are rejecting Jesus before he’s even begun the Church. They’ve lost, are losing, their opportunity. Maybe they're why Jesus doesn't say “all.”

But the “few are chosen” part is hard for us. We've talked about lines like it in Matthew, before, of course. But it sounds so, oh, arbitrary. It goes against the framework many of us have about our relationship to God, which relies on this idea that we do have a choice as to whether or not we are going to respond with obedience and trust to the message Jesus brings.

And honestly, I just think that's true. If we understand “few are chosen” without remembering that to be chosen isn't to have won some divine raffle, it's to have responded positively, personally chosen, to join with God's chosen people, the people God has set on the earth, out of grace, to work for himself and his glory. I was going to say a lot more about this; I won't this morning. There's an insert in your bulletins, or pull me aside, if you want to talk more about this.

Inappropriately Dressed:

The basic point of today's parable was to reveal the way the Pharisees, and their ilk, had rejected God in rejecting Jesus, had claimed for themselves equality to

God in a way not even God's Son did. Jesus hints, apocalyptically, at the way Jerusalem itself will fall, and the Pharisees' way of life with it. And when Jesus ends with "Many are called, but few are chosen," his point is that those who respond to the invitation that Jesus embodies, they do, simply, have to metaphorically dress appropriately.

What does that mean? It can mean a lot of things. That's the power of a metaphor.

It means, as far as Matthew 21, 22, 23 go, not pushing, and testing, and antagonizing Jesus and his disciples. It means accepting that the plain things he says about the way the world is meant to work should be obeyed. It means first of all, believing that he is the Messiah, and I think after that, doing what we do all the time when we gather together: living for him well.

There is no simple set of rules for living a faithful life. It's improvisation, and a few learned things-- disciplines, exercises, practices--that we lean on: like gathering together the ways we do, like spending time with Scripture, like prayer.

I wish it was as easy as wearing the right clothes to a wedding, but it's not. The last wedding I was at, the men wore camo-patterned vests. There are places that won't fit. Faithfulness often depends on context, as much understanding Jesus' parables does, because to

be like Jesus means to be like Jesus somewhere, not everywhere. All our choices are character ones, played out in the situations we inhabit.

Dressing Up:

There was a friend Bo had, who she had a playdate with, like, every couple of months. A little less. And every time he came over, he was dressed up like a different superhero.

When we're kids, we dress up like those we admire; we run around in a costume, doing things the way we think those we admire would do them.

When we're older, we do the same thing. We just do it more subtly, more discreetly, and cling to those who dress like us, too, dress like whoever we think others will appreciate, will find attractive, or funny, or clever, or whatever it is helps us feel like we belong.

But more than once Paul reminds us to dress up like Jesus himself.

Dressing Up Like Jesus:

To be a part of God's People, a member of Jesus' Family, is to, as Paul puts it, "clothe ourselves with Christ." And those clothes are sometimes ill-fitting, they are sometimes formal, sometimes informal. It's not always clear what it means. But it means, at least, living as much like Jesus as we can. We're supposed to

dress up like Jesus, act in the ways we think he'd act.

“The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Paul writes, ***“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh”***

Elsewhere, Paul reminds us:

...you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator....as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds

them all together in perfect unity.

These, oh, exhortations are to character, to lifestyle, to living appropriately given the fact that we've been invited into the life of the Messiah, and we've become part of God's Chosen People, elected to bear witness to God's glory, power, love, providence, and bless the world as we go.

Conclusion:

Our king isn't capricious; he's consistent.

And over and over in the New Testament we see that God has invited us to take part in the life and work of his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Much is demanded of us; this is what it means to be the agents of God's power and love in the world, it's what it means to have accepted the invitation we've accepted. But on the other hand, the company is good, the party favors are amazing, and the God of all creation is so happy that we're here.

I hope that we can take this parable as the warning to the Pharisees that it is, and as an exhortation to live appropriately. We each of us know the challenges our life has brought us; we together can, in love, help each other see them through, and show the world God's faithfulness as we do. Are there clothes we need to change? Behaviors we have to drop or take on? Are we dressing like Christ, like someone else, like the devil?

Ask someone who loves you, “How have I been lately?” and see how they respond, and let's rejoice in any faithfulness, any ways we're dressed well, ready for what comes.