

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness,  
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Well, here we go again!

Matthew sure loves weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I know I've said this before,  
but it bears repeating.

Matthew is an edgy Gospel.

If you are part of an established church,  
a comfortable church,  
kind of like our church,

Matthew will make you decidedly uncomfortable at times.

Most of the time, really.

Perhaps it is because of what was happening when he was writing.

Matthew was writing his Gospel  
right after Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Roman legions.

They were edgy, uncomfortable times.

Kind of like our times.

He was writing to a small, struggling church,  
trying to find its identity.

It was a church rife with those who were,  
for lack of a better word,  
bad Christians,

Christians who were not behaving at all like Jesus did.

At least that was how Matthew saw them.

Matthew wanted his church to get it's act together,  
to separate the wheat from the chaff.

In short, Matthew couldn't wait for judgement day.

It couldn't come soon enough for him.

You can't really blame Matthew

if his mind set just happened to seep into his writing.

It happens to the best of us.

When we look at this story

in the light of what was happening when it was written,

it's easy to put the characters from Matthews life into the story.

God is the king and Jesus is his son.

The wedding feast is the kingdom of God revealed in Christ Jesus.

The slaves sent to invite the honored guests to the wedding feast are the prophets,

and the honored guests are the Israelites,

who are destroyed along with their town, Jerusalem,

when they refuse to join the party.

The new guests are the new Christians,

both good and bad

and the friend tossed from the wedding into the outer darkness

is anyone who has not changed his behavior upon becoming Christian,

like changing his clothes, from bad to good.

In this light it really is quite a simple and straight forward story.

Or it appears to be.

As always happens with parables, however,

there is more. So much more.

Parables, you see,

are only simple and straight forward on the surface.

They are meant to be explored,

and yield up their deeper truths grudgingly.

We know that God accepts us as we are,

and so God surely accepted Matthew as he was.

And we also know, that God takes whatever we give and works with it,  
and so God surely can take what Matthew has written and speak to us.  
Clearly there is already a whole lot more to see and hear in this parable,  
even before we remember that behind Matthew's version of this parable  
is the real parable that Jesus told so many years ago.

We don't know exactly what Jesus said,  
because we have two very different versions.

The one we heard this morning from Matthew's Gospel  
and a similar, though not identical version from the Gospel of Luke.

Like two different people who see the same occurrence,  
the stories are similar, but not quite the same.

That being said, we can be assured that Jesus did tell this parable.

So what might Jesus be saying to us today?

Why don't we start by getting a little more context for this story.

The First Century was a very different time  
and they did things in different ways.

In my research I found some fascinating tid-bits of information.

For one thing,

wedding banquets often involved the whole town or village  
and could take days both to prepare, and to prepare for.

Consequently, the invitation was generally a two part affair.

First the family would send out the invitation to the wedding banquet  
giving a general idea of when the feast would be;

“Simon bar Jonah is pleased to announce  
the marriage of his daughter Rebekah  
to Saul bar Jacob this coming week.

You are cordially invited to attend.”

You knew the wedding celebration was going to happen,  
you just didn't know exactly when it was going to happen.

This “pre-invitation” allowed time for both host and guest  
to prepare for the celebration.

Then when all was in readiness

a servant would come to your door

and announce that the feast was prepared

and you were expected to arrive promptly.

As we heard in our Gospel this morning,

proper attire was expected,

but as we didn’t hear this morning,

proper attire was generally provided

for those that arrived without it.

Much like fancy restaurants requiring a jacket and tie

that provide them to those caught unprepared,

the master of the house would loan a wedding robe

to anyone who arrived without one.

This puts a slightly different spin on the last part of the Gospel,

as the guest that the king names “Friend” is no longer just an unprepared fool,

but is now revealed as an oafish boor

who has spurned the proffered wedding robe.

(Perhaps it didn’t go with his sandals!)

This doesn’t really change the story *all* that much,

but it does serve to soften the ending a bit,

to make the end a little less stark.

A little.

As with all parables,

there are many different peoples to identify with.

These different identities

will stimulate different responses to the parable.

There are two that I would like us to reflect on today.

The first is the perspective of the king's slaves or servants.

Though this is a perspective that will resonate

with the "worker bees" of our community the most,

it has wisdom to teach all of us.

We are all servants of the king after all, are we not?

To stimulate your reflections,

I have one observation to make and two questions to stimulate reflection.

My observation is

that the wedding feast goes on with or without the servants.

The first set of slaves are seized, mistreated, and killed,

but that does not prevent the wedding feast,

or prevent the king from sending out new slaves in search of new guests.

It would appear that the slaves are not very important.

Or are at least expendable.

In the light of this observation

I ask these two metaphorical questions.

Do we as servants of the master go into the streets

and gather them all, both good and bad,

so that the wedding hall will be filled with guests?

(Pause)

And once we all arrive at the banquet, do we do our best

to give them appropriate garments if they are found lacking?

(Pause)

And now, let us take the perspective of the wedding guests.

Again, an observation and some questions.

My observation is

that it sure looks like being invited to the wedding feast is really no big deal.

Everybody gets invited eventually.

Even the guest cast into outer darkness is named as the king's friend.

Actual attendance at the eternal wedding banquet

appears to take more than being a mere acquaintance of the king.

We need to be prepared.

We need to be involved.

And so in the light of these observations

I ask the following questions for your reflections.

How do we respond to the wondrous invitation of God  
to the eternal wedding banquet?

How do you respond?

Do you just show up?

Like the guest caught in the midst of all his arrogant assumptions,

do you remain speechless in the face of the Gospel imperative?

Have you not at least borrowed the wedding robe of righteousness?

(Pause)

If these questions make you a bit uncomfortable,

then Matthew has accomplished the task he set out to accomplish.

He has given an urgency to your faith,

and that's never a bad thing.

(Pause)

God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,

is pleased to invite you to the eternal banquet in honor of the mystical union

between his Son, Christ Jesus and his bride, the church universal.

When all is prepared,

God will send the angels to welcome you to the feast.

The question Matthew reminds us to be asking ourselves,

is will we be ready... really ready

when the summons comes?

Amen.