

Lectionary 28 Year A 2020
October 11, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In some churches this morning, you might hear a sermon based on this gospel reading that goes something like this: God is preparing a wedding banquet for us in heaven, and we need to make sure that we're prepared when God invites us in. We need to make sure that we've got our wedding robe on, and that we've done everything we need to in order to be sure that God will let us stay at the banquet, and we won't be thrown down into hell where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And you might also hear that it's important that you look at those around you and make sure that they're prepared too—make sure they're doing all the right things to get into heaven. And if they're not, these churches will tell you that it's your job to tell them how they need to act, or kick them out until they get their lives in order—because judgement day is coming, and we all need to be prepared for God to take those of us who are worthy into the wedding banquet of heaven. That's what you might hear in some churches this morning.

Now, perhaps it's a bit exaggerated, but I think you get the point. There's a real temptation in this gospel reading to turn it into a threat—you better behave, or you're going to burn in hell. Not only that, but it could be understood that there's a very dangerous invitation in this gospel passage as well. It seems that we are being encouraged to throw people out of the church if we decide that they don't belong or they're not good enough. And that's pretty troubling, but it's easy to see it in the parable.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding banquet, and sent out invitations to all his friends and family and all the people who were worthy enough to attend at the royal palace. But no one showed up to the banquet, and those who were invited refused to go. So, the king told his slaves to bring in everyone from the street so that the wedding banquet would be full of guests, and there would be plenty of people there to enjoy the party. The slaves went out and did as they were told, collecting everyone they could find and bringing them to the banquet. But when the king came in and found someone among the guests who wasn't properly dressed and prepared for the occasion, the king made his slaves throw him back out into the street to suffer.

And you can imagine that when the slaves were done removing this one guy from the party, they probably went around removing others as well because they didn't want to upset the king any further on such a special day.

So, my question for you today is, where do you see yourself in this parable? Are you afraid of being thrown out of the banquet into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? Or are you running through a list in your head of people in your life or in the world who you would like to throw out? Does this passage make you fearful, or does it make you feel a little too comfortable? Does this passage cause you to examine your own life, or does it lead you to scrutinize the lives of those around you?

In seminary, I spent a year working part-time at a church, and one of my responsibilities was to teach an adult Bible study. I had a co-teacher, an 85-year-old man named Chuck, who worked as a funeral director. This man—I think I've told you about him before—had a very deep faith. He came to church every Sunday, wearing his Sunday best. It was clear that he had spent his lifetime reading and studying the Bible, and each time that he was to lead our study, he had pages of notes prepared from the extra research he had done that week. Chuck wanted to be sure that he got it right—both in leading our Bible study, and in his life of faith.

Chuck had a very high respect for pastors. Any time he interacted with the pastors of his church, he would respond to any request by saying, “Yes Pastor, whatever you say.” And while this may have been nice for the pastors to have someone so willing to agree with whatever was suggested, it also taught me something about Chuck. Chuck held pastors in such a high regard, that he believed pastors were more beloved by God than he was. He, in fact, seemed disappointed that God had called others to be pastors, but not him. During my time working at that church, and also through the work of the pastors there, we tried to convince Chuck that God calls each of us to various walks of life, and that doesn’t mean one calling is better or more beloved than another. Certainly, Chuck’s work as a funeral director was holy work that God had called and entrusted to him. But Chuck so often quoted this same verse from our Gospel reading to me: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” And as he would speak this verse, I could see the deep pain that these words caused him, because in Chuck’s context, he had cast himself as one whom God had *not* chosen. In that moment, I saw in Chuck this sadness and fear—the fear that he was not good enough for God. “For many are called, but few are chosen.” These words can easily hurt and even destroy us.

But whether we take this gospel reading as condemnation because we are the ones being thrown out of the banquet, or if we find ourselves justified as we throw others out of the banquet, this passage has the ability to speak to us and to how we live our lives as Christians. I think too often we find ourselves too quick to judge, willing to throw people out of the church because they don’t dress or act or believe the same as we do. We find ourselves quick to condemn others who have not followed the rules, and we are content to see them suffer when they get what we think they deserve. In this way, we might find vindication in this passage because the servants got to throw out the man who wasn’t properly dressed for the banquet.

But many of us, like Chuck, also struggle with being too hard on ourselves, and so we might find ourselves wondering if we’re the next ones to be thrown out. Are we truly worthy of God’s love? How do we ensure that we are properly prepared for God’s eternal wedding banquet?

The problem is that both of these readings of today’s gospel passage miss the point. We are not called to insert ourselves into the faith life of others. We’re not supposed to stick our nose in everyone else’s business and tell them everything they’re doing wrong and how they should live Godly lives. And we’re not here to gossip about what people are wearing to the banquet, or dismiss people because they don’t act according to some arbitrary list that we’ve created about how you have to behave in order to belong. Because at the end of the day, if we are excitedly looking for people to throw out of God’s kingdom, it’s possible that we just might love rules more than we love Jesus.

And at the same time, we’re not supposed to sit here and fret about whether God truly loves us and whether or not we have properly prepared ourselves for the banquet. But we *are* called to pay attention to our own life of faith, and we are called to examine the way that we conduct ourselves in the world. Because our faith *should* change us; it *should* influence the decisions we make and the actions we take in the world. Instead of judging one another, putting up walls, and destroying community, living a life of faith calls us to build bridges and support our community by praying for one another, helping others when they need help, giving generously, and by loving, supporting and serving all of God’s beloved people.

This gospel passage calls us to focus on our own faith practices, to care for our brothers and sisters, and to resist the urge to judge others. But we are often led astray and seriously troubled by this passage when, like Chuck, we forget that God has already chosen each of us.

Shortly after I met Chuck, he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer in his liver and lungs, and he died a couple years later. My prayer for Chuck was always that he knew God's love for him, that he knew he was a beloved child of God. But whether he knew it or not, Chuck now rests in the arms of his Savior because of the promises that were made at his baptism.

In baptism, God clothes each of us with Christ. We have received our robe and everything that we need for that great heavenly feast. In baptism, God promised each of us that we will never be thrown out of the banquet because of what we are wearing, or because of anything about us. We are forever held as God's beloved children.

God has invited us to the banquet, and God has ensured that each of us is prepared. So, now, as we prepare *this* table with rich food and well-aged wine, we are reminded again that all are welcome to the banquet, and that because of God's love that was bestowed upon each of us in baptism, God has prepared us all to join in the celebration of this feast. So, let us go now to the banquet, the feast that welcomes the universe. Thanks be to God. Amen.