10.11.26 Sermon on Matthew 22:1-14

So yesterday was my and Darick's 16th wedding anniversary, (which we kind of both forgot about at first). We had a busy day with other obligations, we didn't get to celebrate. Soon we will, I hope! But I think back to that day 16 years ago – we had our wedding over at First Church in South Charleston, with our reception at Little Creek Country Club. I remember gathering together with family and friends, with really good food and cupcakes. It was a great time of celebration. People came from all over and from our respective churches to celebrate the day with is. This is what weddings are meant to be – great, communal opportunities to give thanks for the new thing that has begun.

And so we come to this parable this week, which is one of the two parables of the wedding feast. There's this one that appears in Matthew's gospel, and there's another one that appears in Luke's gospel. I have to be honest with you, I like the one in Luke's gospel quite a bit more than I like the one in Matthew's gospel. I don't know if you noticed, but the king in this parable is a wee bit violent. When the first guests reject his invitation, he responds by going out in vengeance, destroying parts of their city. And then, regarding the person at the end of the parable, who's not wearing the wedding garment, he says, "Bind him and throw him into outer darkness." I don't know about you, but that troubles me.

The Luke parable is so much nicer! It ends in a celebratory feast where the least and the last are brought into the banquet, and that's that. It's a much more uplifting. It's the parable that I wish I were able to preach this morning, because that's a message that we hear regularly throughout Scripture: God invites everybody, even, and perhaps especially, the people seen as unworthy. They're invited to come in and to sit down at that table. There's room for them even when the world might say otherwise. That's certainly true about the way of Jesus, but I don't think that's what Matthew's version of the wedding banquet parable is about.

It is really tempting for us, when we come to parables, to equate God with the authoritative character in the story. Sometimes it's the landowner, and in this case, it's the king. And that has, indeed, been a traditional reading of this parable. But today I want to offer you a less traditional reading of reading it. This, of course, is one of the beautiful things about parables. They're stories that Jesus tells, and like any good story, it means that there can be more than one truth contained within it. There can be more than one way of reading it.

We are meant to wrestle with Scripture and ask questions of it. This text today raises many questions for us. And so, before we dig into this alternative reading of this parable, I want to invite you to approach it with an open heart, an open mind, and a willingness to see this familiar story in something of a new light.

One of the beauties of Scripture is that we can hold differing readings in tension with one another, knowing that we can still find God when we come to the text and wrestle with it together. And so sometimes faith asks us to look at these familiar passages again with new eyes, trusting that God will meet us there. In today's reading of this parable, rather than looking at the king as the God metaphor in this story, I want us to look at in a way that identifies Jesus with the guest without a wedding garment. This will probably be a really different reading than some of you are used to, and that's okay. We don't have to resolve every question about this text today.

The opening question for me with this story today is, “what if the most disturbing character in this parable isn't the guest who arrives without a proper garment, but it's the king who insists on controlling the celebration?” We have this king who is preparing a royal wedding feast for his son. He sends out the invitations to the expected guests, the people of status and power, to come and to celebrate. But those guests are all busy. They're tending to their business, and a few even set upon the king’s servants issuing the invitations. And the king responds to this rejection with violence.

The king uses military force. This is a king who is not happy. He is completely embarrassed, so he wants to punish the people who have embarrassed him by not showing up to this wedding banquet. He sends his troops out to destroy people and to burn their city. That does not sound like a good or loving king to me.

But then he extends what appears to be a generous invitation to have everyone left off the original guest list come to the party. Is it generosity? I don’t think so. I think what is driving the king is embarrassment. This was a time where honor and shame were a huge part of the society. The king is trying to save face here. And so, the new guests show up, and it seems that all is well. But then the story ends with one person who shows up not wearing the proper garment. For shame! The king punishes the guest and casts him out. That seems to go against the broad invitation the king has just issued. Why would the king punish the person who was invited at the last minute just because he's not wearing the proper garment? The question for us is, why do we automatically assume when we read this parable that the violent king is the representation of God?

What if this parable is actually exposing the logic of rulers who demand loyalty and punish dissent in this alternative reading? The king represents the logic of domination and imperial power. And the guest without the garment becomes this figure through whom we can imagine Jesus, who was condemned and executed by empire. Even though the king issues an invitation, there is always a threat of violence behind it. He insinuates, “You come, you be present, but you do things the way that I want you to;” and if not, the threat of violence lingers over your head.

Matthew's first century audience lived under Roman imperial rule. They lived under military occupation, under public executions, and they lived under the destruction of cities as signs of imperial power. The king's actions here would have sounded very much like what they had seen in their own lived experience. The king is maintaining his power, honor, and position through violence.

Now the guest list does expand, as I said, and that seems hopeful and generous at first. “Gather everyone in the streets, both the good and the bad.” The social status and moral reputation will no longer determine who can be brought to the banquet. I wish that was the part I could preach without having to consider the rest of the parable. The banquet does appear to be very inclusive, but only if the guests conform. The king retains the power to define what is acceptable participation. There's a difference between welcome and freedom. The guests can come in, but they have to conform. And so empire can absorb “outsiders” while still maintaining power. Marginalized people can be invited in, but only if you participate in the right way and you adhere to the structure that already exists.

In this parable, the question is not just about who enters the room, but it's about what the room requires them to become. And so, the king notices that one guest without the wedding garment, and that guest becomes the unsettling center of this story. He is singled out. The king comes in and spots him across the room. The king says, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?? The guest remains silent.

There are things that the text leaves unanswered for us. Matthew doesn't explain why the guest lacked a garment. The text does not establish whether or not the garment was provided for by the king, which some scholars say that would have been an expectation in that time. If that were the case, one could assume that the king would have provided a garment and this guest had rejected it. But the text doesn't offer that. Regardless, what we do see is that that garment is a symbol of conformity. It’s the uniform of belonging. You need to put on the robes of the king in order to be in this space. The ceremonial clothing legitimizes the authority of the ruler. And those symbols of loyalty turn participation into consent.

So if we're thinking about this in the context of the Roman Empire, Caesar allowed a citizen to have a certain level of freedom – as long as you paid homage to Caesar, you paid your taxes and participated in the appropriate and necessary rituals, and if you were ok with acknowledging the “divinity” of Caesar, he would leave you alone. You had to put on the “garment of empire” in order to protect yourself and to remain safe under the king's authority.

Jesus refuses to wear the garment of empire. Jesus does not exercise power like the king. Jesus welcomes those pushed to the margins. Jesus challenges domination, and he does not bring about his rule through coercion like the king in this parable does.

To put this parable in context, just a few days earlier, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey in the triumphal entry in what was something of a mock, theatrical, satire version of Caesar's processions. He has flipped over the tables in the Temple and he has been confronting the religious leaders. In fact, this is a parable that he tells to the religious leaders! During Holy Week! And in just a few days from this moment, Jesus is going to be taken by the Roman Empire, cast into outer darkness to be crucified on the cross at Golgotha.

When you locate this parable in that moment, perhaps we can see more clearly this alternative reading. Jesus becomes that condemned outsider. The Roman soldiers strip Jesus, they dress him in a robe, and they mock his kingship. Jesus is treated as a threat to the established order, to the ways of Rome, and he is subjected to the violence of the state. He is mocked as “King of the Jews.” The king in the parable destroys a city when his authority is challenged. But when Jesus is confronted by violence, he does not summon an army to destroy his enemies. He dies on the cross at the hand of that violence. The garment-less guest and Jesus are not explicitly linked in this parable, but the Passion narrative that is about to follow does invite us to consider this theological comparison between the two.

When we look at this parable, we can ask the question, what if the one who's condemned in this parable is actually closer to Jesus than the king is to Jesus? If the king represents imperial domination, Jesus stands with those exposed to its violence, rather than with rulers who use violence to secure obedience. The parable ends with coercion. “Bind him, throw him into outer darkness.” The kind’s final words are words of expulsion. They're not words of hospitality.

Here’s the danger of equating the king with God. If every action of the king is directly identified with God, then divine authority becomes indistinguishable from the violence used by that authority. And that’s not how Jesus operates. A reading that equates the king with God sanctifies the structures of domination that church, throughout much of its history, has exercised, in what I think is a very faulty and unfaithful way. The king’s violence needs to be examined, questioned.

Then there's that final saying in the parable: “Many are called, but few are chosen.” Traditional interpretations often understand this as a warning that not everybody who receives an invitation is actually prepared for the kingdom. I do think that is a very fair

warning and a very fair reading of this last line. But this alternative examination of the parable asks whether being included in the king's banquet is the same thing as being faithful to God's liberating purposes. In other words, is being included in the ways of empire the same thing as being faithful to Jesus? This parable, especially in the greater context of Matthew's Gospel, tells us, “No, it's not the same thing!”

Participation in the world around us and its power structures, even in the name of Christ, is not the same thing as discipleship. People can participate in institutions of all kinds without challenging the injustices that exist there. People can benefit from systems while ignoring the suffering of other people. People can wear the appropriate “garments” of Christianity and remain complicit in violence. People can show up, say all the right Christian things, while participating in opposing systems of coercion and domination. We see that all around us today. I think the question is not just “have we been invited to the feast?” I think the question is, “whose feast is it? Whose feast are we participating in? Is it the feast of empire? Is it the feast of Jesus Christ?”

Again, I prefer personally the Luke version of this parable, where it ends with this banquet filled with the nobodies, the misfits, and those deemed unworthy, because I think that's what the kingdom of God is like. I do believe that is the feast that we are called to. But I'm not so sure about the feast of this king in Matthew's Gospel. And so we return to the guest. He stands before the ruler. He's questioned, and he remains silent. The king does have the power to bind him and to throw him out.

Jesus stood exposed before the ruler of his day, Pontius Pilate. He's often remaining silent, and sometimes throwing back a question. Pontius Pilate has the power to bind him and to throw him out. The powerful cast out Jesus because his life and message threatened their order, their banquet. Today, we may be left with more questions than answers.

Some of the questions this parable leaves us with include: whose power are we being asked to celebrate whose suffering is hidden? What symbols of loyalty are we expected to wear in our world today? Who is being bound and cast out so that the powerful can preserve their order? And when Jesus appears among the condemned and the outcast, will we recognize him?

Now, the good news is that not every act of a powerful ruler can be deemed divine justice. Jesus is the one to whom we look for an understanding of justice. Jesus enters into the world of imperial power and reveals its violence as he is condemned and crucified. Christ always stands with those whom empire humiliates, or excludes, or destroys. And Jesus calls us towards a different kingdom, towards a different type of feast, where greatness, is measured by service, and enemies are not met with hatred, but with love.

May we have the courage to refuse the garments that make injustice respectable, the wisdom to question power that demands our unquestioning loyalty, and the faith to recognize Christ among those whom the powerful cast out. Amen.