

Judgment and Empowerment
A Sermon on Matthew 22:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Jesus' message is Good News in a world that seems to have more than its rightful share of grief and bitterness. Jesus' message is Good News for women and men who are striving to be faithful in a world that seems full of violence and rudeness.

Let's remember that the time and place where Jesus lived also had plenty of grief and bitterness. It was a time and place of violence and rudeness. It was a time and place where Jesus' disciples had to be careful about their actions and the things they said. It was a matter of life and death. It was a time and place where Jesus had to be careful about his actions, and the things he said.

Jesus knows how this story is going to end, but Jesus had work to do. Jesus had a message to share. Jesus had to find ways to share his message, even though it was a dangerous time. So Jesus often spoke in parables. In his parables, Jesus told the truth, but he told the truth in a way that made it possible for him to survive, for another few days, or another few weeks. Jesus is trying to survive for another few days or weeks because he has a few more essential tasks to complete before he gets to the end.

Jesus has some important things to say in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two of Matthew. But it would be dangerous for him to say these things directly, so he speaks in parables. In these chapters, Jesus is speaking in the outer courtyard of the Temple, which was a very public place where the Gentiles and common, ordinary people could assemble. In these chapters a group of people has gathered around Jesus, including a fairly large group of priests, scribes and pharisees.

In the beginning of the scene the priests, scribes and pharisees asked Jesus a question to challenge his authority and derail his ministry. After this opening confrontation, Jesus shows his boldness by staying there in the courtyard and telling three parables. Let's recall that after Jesus told the first two parables, the pharisees, priests and scribes realized he was speaking directly about them. They were furious and wanted to arrest Jesus, but it was not the right time. Jesus was in a public place, surrounded by a large group of people sometime in the middle of the day. They had to find a time when it was dark and Jesus was more vulnerable.

Jesus knows they are furious but continues right on with his third parable, which reinforces the themes of the previous parables and adds one more crucial element to Jesus' message. *Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come."* These people said they would come to the wedding, but they didn't show up for the big event. This reiterates the message of the first parable, where a man asked his two sons to go work in his vineyard. Both parables point toward the necessity of having integrity between our words and our actions.

Jesus continues, saying, *Again, the king sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.'* But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

Let's notice that the king was very generous. When the guests did not respond to his first reminder, he sent more slaves to remind them to come to the wedding. In the same way, God is patient and generous with us. God gives us many opportunities to respond to God's invitation.

Let's also notice that the intended wedding guests are behaving like the rude, vicious people in the second parable. In the second parable Jesus told about a landowner who built a beautiful vineyard and leased it to some tenants. In their greed and self-assurance the tenants killed the landowner's own son in an outrageous move to take ownership of the vineyard.

In the same way, in today's parable, the people who were supposed to come to the wedding are rude. Their behavior is outrageous. Jesus is indicting the priests, the scribes and pharisees for their rude, vicious treatment of John the Baptist. The same indictment applied to the leaders of Israel who harassed and killed the Hebrew prophets centuries before Jesus' time. It also applies in our time to leaders of the nations who make light of the suffering of the common people and treat refugees, immigrants, minority groups, and their political opponents with violence and viciousness.

The parable continues, *The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.* God is generous, but God will not be welcoming those who have deliberately hurt and murdered God's people. They boast in their own power. The rude, vicious, violent people are confident they are right. They have refused God's invitation.

In the parable, *The king said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'* *Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.* Whatever else you might say, it's a memorable scene. The king fights a war while the food for the wedding banquet sits on the tables of the hall, and then, perhaps just a few hours later, welcomes a crowd of guests into the hall to eat the food, which is presumably cold and covered with ashes because the city has been torched by the king's troops.

Jesus doesn't intend for us to take the parable literally; he is creating a vivid, imaginary scene because he wants us to understand and remember the main point. God is inviting all of the people to a banquet. God's invitation and God's salvation are intended for all people, not just for one group of people. God does not care about whether or not we are natives or immigrants or whether we can read or write. God does not care whether our parents were members of the church, or what jobs we do to pay the rent and buy our food. God invites everyone to the wedding feast. When we show up for God's banquet we are going to be surprised because there is lots of diversity in the people who respond to God's invitation.

Jesus continues to tell his story, saying, *"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* *For many are called, but few are chosen."*

If we are trying to understand these words literally, this passage is absurd. These wedding guests were not given any time to prepare, they were brought directly from everyday life, from the street into the wedding banquet. How could any of them be expected to come into the wedding hall dressed for the occasion? The absurdity of the scene indicates this is not about whether or not we are wearing the right clothes for the occasion.

Jesus is pointing toward a reality we see in our lives. Every day we see people who say they read and follow the Bible, yet they treat God's people with rudeness, viciousness and violence. Each day we encounter people who claim to be disciples of Christ Jesus, yet they treat the poor, the immigrants, the widows, the orphans and those suffering from diseases as if they are not even human beings. As Christians, their behavior is so egregious it stands out like someone wearing sweats and ragged t-shirt to a wedding banquet.

It was the same way in Jesus' time. The priests in the Temple were stealing from the widows and the poor. The people who thought of themselves as highly religious excluded the sick and disabled people. The religious professionals were colluding with the Romans to persecute and eliminate their rivals. Their behavior was so egregious it stood out like someone wearing a bathing suit to a wedding.

Now do you understand why Jesus is speaking in such a convoluted way? He is telling the story of the corruption of those in power, pretty much straight to their faces.

In the end, no matter our rank or status or wealth, God is our judge. This is the message of the parable. This is both judgment and empowerment, because God's standard of judgment is mercy and love.

God's demand for us to live with integrity is both judgment and empowerment, because when we live with integrity we are empowered to trust one another. We act in trustworthy ways, and we find that we are blessed because we are surrounded by women and men who are acting in trustworthy ways.

God demands for us to live with humility, to not think of ourselves as better than others or deserving special awards or titles or rewards. This is both judgment and empowerment. We are empowered to treat each other as sisters and brothers.

God invites us to join in the wedding feast. There is only one catch; when we join in the gathering we will notice there are many people at the wedding banquet who don't look like us, don't wear the same clothes, don't speak the same language, don't live in the same neighborhood, and don't do the same jobs. There is just one way we are alike; each one of us is following the commands of the Lord of love.

This is both judgment and empowerment. We are required to live and embrace one another in a community of diversity and equality. We are empowered to live as equal members of the body of Christ, knowing deep in our hearts that each person is created in the image of God.