

Sermon: Welcome to the Banquet

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22:1-14**

Ohhh, we got trouble, terrible, terrible trouble, with a capital ‘T.’ That rhymes with ‘P’ and that stands for – Parable, with apologies to Meredith Willson.

Last week, we spoke about how this series of three parables would get more and more violent; this is number three and it’s pretty gruesome. We sometimes forget that Jesus lived in a dangerous time and that his lessons were not always easy to hear. We would much rather hear about a miracle or an interesting dinner with undesirables.

This is not the case today, and neither is it the case with Moses and the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Why would Jesus tell this parable? Why would the Israelites abandon Moses and make a golden calf, for that matter? What is going on? The Bible is supposed to be inspirational; it’s not supposed to make us cringe, is it?

In this parable, Jesus leaves us with some dead slaves, a burned city, a bunch of people who were compelled to go to a party, a guest expelled from said party because his wardrobe was lacking – is this what the kingdom of heaven is like? Notice that the only ones doing what the king commands are the slaves and the troops. Notice also that the banquet goes on – the king is, after all, the king.

Of the original invitees, one went to his farm and another to his business. Why would Matthew point that out? Perhaps because whatever kind of farm it was – animals or crops – would be okay on its own for a day or so. So that guy could have gone to the banquet if he wanted to. But the one who went to his business – the Greek word used by Matthew was *emporion*, which could mean a marketplace or merchandise. Bottom line: this guy would rather be doing business, making money. In his second letter, Peter used the same word but in a different context; he used it to mean *exploit with deception*.

Throughout the Bible, merchants were sketchy characters. Deuteronomy says we should give only ‘a full and honest measure’, that we should only use honest weights, ‘so

that your days will be long' (Deuteronomy 25:13-16). The prophet Amos condemned merchants who practiced deceit with false balances and who sold chaff and called it wheat (Amos 8:4-6).

This is why today's parable calls out merchants: because more often than not, they had earned their bad reputation. The farmer who didn't trust God to look after his crops for a few days and the merchant who only wanted to make money represent a particular kind of sinner and deserved special attention, at least to Matthew and Jesus.

At the end, the slaves gathered both good and bad and filled the wedding hall. Would the bad be included in the kingdom of heaven? And they weren't even chosen – they were *gathered in* only to fill empty seats.

It looks as if the covenant relationship between king and subjects is broken, because otherwise, would you refuse your king and expect to get away with it?

What kind of king is this? How does the kingdom of heaven compare to him? Jesus usually says 'the kingdom of heaven is *like*' a landowner, or a mustard seed, or yeast. But here he *compares* it to a king no one likes and who will resort to violence to get what he wants. Remember that Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and Pharisees.

So, again, we wonder – what kind of parable is this?

Is this a parable about salvation? If so, then where is free will? The Book of Sirach addresses choice, saying:

*If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.* (Sirach 15:15-17)

So, the parable is probably not about that. The people in the first century knew about keeping the commandments.

So, is the parable about God's grace? If so, then why burn down an entire city simply because a few people sinned? It can't be about the messianic banquet at the end times, because this is a banquet where no one eats. If the king here is supposed to be God, then who would want to worship such a god?

But what if we heard this parable not as being about the kingdom of heaven but about human kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice?

The people who heard these stories from Jesus paid attention – ‘let anyone with ears listen!’ (Matthew 11:15) They were challenged; they were provoked; they were reminded, perhaps, of their own sorry situations. And in some way, maybe they were convinced that the way things were for them were not the way things should be at all.

Maybe this parable serves as a reminder that God had originally invited the ancient Israelites to be God’s people, to be an example to all the nations.

Aaron fashioned a golden calf ‘with a graving tool’ (Exodus 32:4b, KJV). That calf represented YHWH to the people in the form of a god they could see, but they had made it for themselves. The people shaped God according to their own desires.

They had been quick to turn aside from the way God commanded in the ‘ten words’ we heard last week. And that almost brought disaster to them, until Moses intervened, begging God to change his mind, which God did. Even God can relent.

Interestingly, with God now in front of them in the form of a golden idol – clearly breaking commandments #1 & #2 – they rejoiced; they made a festival to the Lord and feasted. Surely, that can’t be all bad. But is the presence of an idol necessary to prompt joy in the human heart? No, the Israelites sin was in having a limited vision of God.

We know people who will not approach the Communion table, thinking that they are somehow unworthy, that whatever their sin may be, it’s so bad that it precludes God’s forgiveness and reconciliation.

We also know people who are afraid of Hebrew Scripture because they believe the God of Moses is a mean god, a hairy thunderer, if you will, every ready to incinerate us all. They prefer the kind and gentle God-with-us they see in Jesus.

And we all know people who believe their idea of God is incompatible with ours. In fact, I know a chaplain who once encountered such a person in a hospital. The patient was adamant that her God was nothing like my friend’s God, and that her God was the one true God. So, my friend said, tell me about your God. And the woman launched into a long *exposition* about her God. At the end, she said, Jesus-like, ‘What do you think?’ My friend said, ‘Your God sounds a lot like my God.’

That broke down a wall and the two then began talking about life and everything else on an even footing, simply because they shared this one common understanding.

Would that have been the case if the woman’s god were a golden calf?

Misunderstandings abound in the Bible as they do in the modern world. Take today's Exodus reading as an example. In verse seven, the Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely." But then Moses said to God, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt?"

In reality, the escape from Egypt was a co-production, and Moses knew that it was only by God's mighty hand that they all made it out alive. So, for God and Moses, there was a lot of grey area. Their shared understanding of the event was incomplete; God saw it one way and Moses saw it in another. And the people saw it yet another way.

What we know about God would fill a teacup, yet the person who avoids the Communion table because of his sin believes that God has judged him and written him off. And the people who are frightened of the God of Moses whose wrath sometimes burns hot might be surprised to find that God is also reasonable, and that God keeps promises. And if your idea of God is so limited that there is no room for my vision of God alongside yours, God just might send someone to help open your eyes.

Matthew's Gospel shows a lot of concern for the kingdom of heaven and how we might perceive it. His concerns perhaps should be our concerns. Jesus' parables are lessons to teach us, yes, but they sometimes expose us to ugly truths that lie just below the surface, as we saw today. But the whole point – the good news – is that God loves us and wants us to live in peace right here and now.

God also wants us to know that we all have a seat at the banquet if we choose to go. And God will wait for us to decide because God's steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.

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