

A Wedding Disaster of Biblical Proportions

Hespeler, October 15, 2023 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 32:1-14, Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23, Philippians 4:1-9, [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

Weddings are supposed to be the happiest of all occasions, but we all know that they can sometimes be fraught affairs. They are high stress events, and this can bring out the worst in people. Couples may clash over the details. They may find themselves in arguments with their future in-laws. Families, being complicated as they are, can often become very hurtful with one another. We've all heard stories of weddings that went very wrong.

A Strange Wedding

But what if I were to tell you a story of a wedding that was organized entirely by the groom's father. What's more, this father seems to have had absolutely no regard for the wishes of his son, or the bride and what she might like, that doesn't even come up at all.

So, it already sounds like that wedding is not going to go very well, doesn't it? Well, you have no idea! This wedding is so bad, that even before it begins, hundreds of people, maybe even thousands, will die because of it.

How Wrong it Goes

Messengers who are sent out with the invitations will be tortured and murdered. Whole cities will be attacked and burned to the ground. But, despite all this slaughter, is the wedding called off? Is it even postponed? Not at all. The guest list is updated, and the guests arrive, once again with absolutely no attention being paid to the bride or the groom.

Then before the wedding feast even begins, one of the wedding guests finds himself being bound hand and foot and cast into the most disturbing place imaginable. And this is supposed to be a joyful celebration of two people pledging their love? What would you think of such a story?

Even more important, where would you think to find such a story? In the latest season of the wedding disaster reality television series, *Bridezillas*? Would you expect to find it in a book written by George R.R. Martin? No, this incredibly disastrous wedding is described in the Bible.

Luke's Version

Jesus once told a parable about a great feast. And this parable is found in two different gospels – Matthew and Luke. But Luke's version of the parable has always been more popular. In Luke, the story is pretty straightforward. A man organizes a great meal – not a wedding, just a feast – and invites some friends.

But the guests can't come when the meal is ready. They offer their various excuses, but they can't make it. And so, the host, not wanting all his food to go to waste, decides to fill his banqueting hall with all the outsiders of society instead – the poor, the blind and the lame.

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That is it, that's the whole story in the Gospel of Luke. Nobody gets murdered, no cities are burned to the ground, nobody gets bound hand and foot and left to die. It's kind of dull by comparison when you think of it. But I think that's the parable that most people remember. And when they read the version of the parable in the Gospel of Matthew, the murder wedding version, the impression of the simpler parable is so strong that I think we almost skip over all of the death and destruction.

A Twist Ending

So, what is really going on here, and why do we have such a radically more violent version of the parable in the Gospel of Matthew?

It seems to me that there is no question that Jesus told a parable that had an important twist ending. He wanted to put into people's minds a very particular image of the kingdom of God – an image that made a point of including all the marginal outcasts, the people who lived on the fringes of society and who everyone else despised. And, at the same time, he wanted to put forward the image of a kingdom where the elites, the privileged and the hyper-religious missed out.

But the problem was that that kind of thing simply didn't happen in his world, just like it doesn't in ours. Whenever anything nice happens, we all know, it is the rich and the privileged who get the front row seats while the people who live on the fringe are left out in the cold. And so, Jesus had to come up with a somewhat convoluted tale of a banquet that ended with a ridiculous situation where everything normal was all topsy-turvy.

People Struggled with the Ending

And I suspect that this crazy image of the kingdom of God that Jesus was trying to get across was really hard for people to get their heads around. I'm sure they were constantly saying things like, "Jesus doesn't really mean that *those people* who live on the fringes are going to have all the best seats in the kingdom of God, does he?" So, they struggled with this story and retold it to try and make it make sense for them.

Luke Makes Sense of it

For the writer of the Gospel of Luke, I guess it was enough for him to understand the story by realizing that the wealthy and important people of this world often have so many demands on their time and attention. "**I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it... I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out... I have just been married...**" (Luke 14:18-20) These were the kinds of busy demands that were put on wealthy people's time. So, it kind of made sense to Luke that, in the midst of all the busyness of their important lives, they might fail to notice the priorities of the kingdom of God.

Meanwhile, the poor and marginalized folks, as far as Luke knew anyways, had nothing but time to pursue the kingdom's goals, so that helped him to understand how they might actually end up in preferred positions in the kingdom.

So that was how Luke presented the parable of Jesus; it made sense to him that way. And he wasn't wrong in the interpretation. That was certainly a good part of what Jesus was trying to say about how the rich and the poor responded differently to the challenge of the kingdom of God.

Matthew's Different Approach

But there is clearly something a little bit different going on in Matthew's version of the parable. I think, in fact, that he might have understood some of the deeper meaning of the parable. In Matthew, the reason why the elites don't make it into the kingdom isn't because they are too busy with other matters.

They aren't part of it because they find the very idea of the kingdom of God – a kingdom where they don't get to be in charge – to be ridiculous. **"But they made light of it and went away,"** is their initial response. They mock the very idea and find it silly!

But then, when despite their mockery of the ideals of the kingdom, it persists, the elites soon turn violent. **"While the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them,"** it says.

A Radical Vision

This is making a very important point about Jesus' message of the kingdom of God. It is not just a nice idea. It is not just some idyllic vision of a world that is different and that includes outsiders and marginalized people. It is a threat, because it calls into question the existing world order. And the powerful of this world do not take such threats lightly.

Where Are We in this Parable?

Where are we, at this particular moment in time, in terms of this parable? I think that we are somewhere between the mockery and the threat of violence. At least this is how I've been experiencing it.

We had seemed to be getting someplace in our society in terms of including some marginalized people. Indigenous people, people of colour, sexual and gender minorities were at least starting to get a voice within the larger society. A few years ago, I would have said that that was where we were going, and it seemed to promise something for the future.

But now we have seen a growing backlash to such ideas. And it started, just like in Jesus' parable, with mockery. People made fun of what they called wokeness and the woke agenda as if there were something foolish about listening to minority groups and their concerns. Is the next step in terms of maintaining the privileges of certain groups and the status quo going to be violence against those who are different? This parable certainly suggests that that is where it could go next, and it certainly does sometimes feel that way.

In any case, I think that that is why Matthew's version of this parable takes such a dark and bloody turn. He seems to recognize the inherent threat of the kingdom of God to the ways of this world and he understands how the world will react.

An Odd Ending

But there is one more aspect of Matthew's version of the parable that has always puzzled me – a part that is completely absent from Luke's version of the parable. It is the part at the end when the banquet hall is filled with all the misfits, outsiders and despised people in a perfect vision of the nature of the kingdom of God.

But one of the guests, despite having been accepted and given a place as he was, has decided not to wear the wedding garment that has been provided for him. For this reason, he is thrown out of the feast and into the outer darkness.

While the rest of the parable seems to be about how the world at large reacts to the nature of the kingdom of God, this part seems to be directed specifically at the church. The church, after all, is supposed to be a reflection, however partial, of the true nature of the kingdom of God. It is to be a place where all are welcome regardless of who they are because we all recognize that we are outsiders and marginalized when it comes to living up to God's righteousness.

The Wedding Garments

The wedding garments seem to represent the basis upon which we can all claim to have a place in the church. They represent the righteousness of God that is imparted to us, not because we have earned it, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

But unfortunately, we sometimes forget the basis upon which we gained entry to the church. We can become proud and start to think ourselves better than others who have not been around so long. We can become judgmental of those who do not fit in. We can become angry or resentful at those who threaten our comfortable status quo within the church.

That is when we take off the robe of righteousness that has been given to us because we begin to feel as if we have earned our place by our own righteousness. That mistake is reflected in the foolish guest at the end of the parable.

What we do to Ourselves

I'm not saying that God is going to bind us hand and foot and cast us out when that happens. I don't think God treats us like that. But, in many ways that is what we end up doing to ourselves when we fall into such a state of being. We exile ourselves from the truth of the kingdom. That is what the end of the parable warns us against.

So, this parable, particularly as it is told in the Gospel of Matthew, tells us two important things about the kingdom of God. First, it reminds us that its inclusive vision – welcoming and valuing all the outcasts and rejects of society, all the ones that we struggle to accept – is a threat to this world's order. The world reacts with mockery and ultimately with violence to such a threat.

Living in the Reality of the Kingdom

But second, this parable is there to remind us of who we are supposed to be as followers of Christ. We are to be those who learn to live in the reality of the kingdom despite the world's rejection of it. We do so because we recognize our own unworthiness and do not turn away from our own failings. We welcome the robe of righteousness given to us by Christ because we know it is a gift.

And having so freely received that gift, we are empowered to exercise that same grace towards others – welcoming them as they are. Valuing them even if the world despises them. Making a place for those whom the world passes over. For we, in our own small way when we gather, are to live out that reality of God's kingdom and show the world that it is possible.