

Matthew 22:1-14 (NRSV)

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. Again he 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. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he 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.

"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."

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

Sunday school teachers are, in my experience, the best people in the world. I say this as something of a failed Sunday School teacher. At our home church, Linda and I taught Sunday School and I still remember the stark terror of facing a class of inquisitive but easily bored 5th graders, and when I do, I break out into a cold sweat. Now add to that the fact that on some weeks we would be teaching material that has defeated centuries of preachers,

theologians, translators and interpreters and you get some sense of the uphill battle Sunday School teachers face.

Today's text is one that stumps not only Sunday School teachers but many ordinary Christians as well. It begins well enough. The King gives a wedding banquet for his son. He sends his slaves out with a reminder of the banquet and the slaves come back with the news that no one is coming. The King persists – “Look,” he says, “I've prepared the dinner, the oxen and calves have been slaughtered, everything is ready, come to the banquet.”

Now the story becomes a little strange – the guests seize the slaves, mistreat and kill them. The King is enraged and while dinner is sitting on the table, the King sends troops to kill the guests and burn down the city, which is, of course, presumably his own city. The king says that those who were invited at first weren't worthy, and so he sends his slaves out to get the street people and nobodies, the good people and the bad ones, and invite them to the banquet. They do this and the hall is full.

The Sunday school teachers have barely hung on to this point. They know this is an allegory, that this is really a story about God's gracious offer to the people of God and the careless response of the people to the grace they have been offered. They are a little uncomfortable that the allegory has God destroying his careless people and burning their city, but the offer of grace to a new people of nobodies, the good and the bad together sounds right.

But now, the allegory takes another turn. One of the guests shows up without a wedding robe, the King sees him and inquires about his outfit. When the man has nothing to say, the King tells his attendants to tie him up and toss him out into the outer darkness. And at this point, the Sunday School teachers throw up their hands and think about how, maybe, it would be easier to volunteer to count the offering to fulfill their Christian obligations.

As Pastor Wendy pointed out last week, this is the third of three texts about judgment. In the first, Jesus talked about the Yes and No brothers who were asked to go work in the vineyard – one says he won't go but does, and one says he will go and does not. The point, of course, is that people who say they will live as God intends but then don't are on very shaky ground and the nobodies who live as God's intends will enter the kingdom first whether they say the right words or not.

Last week upped the ante a bit – the tenants who attempt to seize the vineyard from its rightful owner are condemned and the vineyard is given over to those who will tend it properly, as stewards of its gifts. But this week, those who refuse to come to the banquet are destroyed and their city is burned. Those who come to the banquet but who don't enter into the celebration are tied up and tossed out. And we are left scratching our heads and wondering what why the King has been so rough on some poor guy whose only offense is a dress code violation after coming to a banquet he didn't even know about before this morning.

Many centuries of interpreters have tried to make this allegory less offensive, pointing out that in some cultures the host would provide festive clothing for the guests, so the fact that this guy didn't wear it meant that he wasn't really taking part as he should. OK, that's possible.

But let me suggest a different strategy – the purpose of this parable is not to demonstrate what happens if you break the dress code for heaven, but rather to tell us how much God loves us and how much God wants us to take part in the feast of life he's prepared for us. God has done everything – given us a wonderful, welcoming world full of sunshine and soft rain and beautiful seasons. He's given us children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents. He's given us abundant resources and a creation that works very hard to heal itself from the damage we've done to it, if we just give it a chance.

But most important, he forgives us for all that we have done, for our carelessness, for refusing to come to the banquet or coming to the banquet and then sulking because it isn't exactly what we wanted or the guest list includes people we don't approve of. God forgives us all of this.

Because here's the thing – these texts are knit together for these three weeks in order to convince us that God will judge, but I don't think we have any trouble believing that today. We've seen our mistakes and misjudgments magnified to a frightening scale. We've seen hurricanes and catastrophes and disasters enough to believe in judgment all right – what we can't believe in is forgiveness.

I can't tell you how often people come to me and say, I just don't see how God can forgive me for what I've done. And what they're really saying is *because I can't forgive myself*. I'm reminded of a story Rob Bell tells, that his young son, maybe 10 years old, was caught in doing something wrong, and he's just busted, caught flat out. And the boy is so distressed that he runs upstairs and hides under the bedspread of his parents' bed and just stays there for hours. And finally Rob comes upstairs and sees this lump of hot, sweaty boy underneath the bedspread, so ashamed and so embarrassed, knowing that he's going to have to apologize and make up for what he's done and feeling like he can't ever make amends. And so Rob rolls the bedspread back and sees his boy, drenched with sweat and Rob takes him in his arms and says, "Nothing that you can ever do could make me love you less. Nothing. Nothing that you can ever do could make me love you less. Nothing." And the boy just lays in his father's arms and sobs and sobs. But he knows that it's going to be all right.

What parent wouldn't want to do the same thing, to hold that child and tell him, "Nothing that you can ever do could make me love you less?" And what child doesn't need to hear that, at some time or another? And aren't we all children in that way?

This parable contains an important truth – God would be right to judge us for our carelessness, for our self-centeredness, for our wastefulness and destructiveness, for refusing and perverting his good gifts to us. God would be right to destroy us and burn our cities and leave us in the outer darkness. God would be right.

But what God does instead is roll back the bedspread and take our sweaty, tearstained, guilty faces in his hands and say, “Nothing you can ever do could make me love you less. Nothing.”

We need to hear the word of judgment, yes we do, because we are careless and self-centered, wasteful and ruled by anger. But we also need to hear the word of forgiveness, because God is none of these things, not careless or self-centered or wasteful or ruled by anger. God is God and for that we can say, thanks be to God. Amen.