

# *Sermon: Pentecost XVIII: Proper 23*

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October 12, 2014

Year A

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

I don't know about you, but I have noticed for the last few weeks, that our gospel readings portray an "edgier", more aggressive Jesus. To understand today's reading, and the other recent gospel selections, it may be useful to place these readings into the context of what was going on in the life of Christ.

In Matthew's previous chapter, Chapter 21, he describes Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. As prophesied, He entered riding on a donkey. He then proceeded to the Temple, where he drove out the various merchants and moneychangers. Once the Temple was cleansed, Jesus healed the sick until challenged by the Temple authorities, where upon he leaves the city for the night.

The next morning, on his way back into the city, he cursed the barren fig tree before returning to the Temple to teach. When Jesus is again questioned by the Temple leaders regarding his authority to teach, he puts the authorities on the defensive by asking about the nature of John's authority to baptize. After frustrating their line of questioning, he further ruffles their feathers with the parable of the two sons. As Mike says, the son who said "No" and did "Yes" and the one who said "Yes" and did "No". All of these parables and events are openly pointed at the religious authorities and harsh in their criticism. Unlike earlier in his ministry, there is no holding back the open criticism and hostility that Jesus has for the Pharisees', Sadducees', scribes' and priests' behavior. At this point, you should almost be able to hear the CBS "60 Minutes" stopwatch ticking in the background, counting down the remaining seconds of Christ's life. He is now only days away from his death, which he foretold for the third time, on his way to Jerusalem. Matthew's Chapter 21 ends with last week's gospel reading

about the wicked tenants who kill the landlord's son in order to gain his inheritance and now face divine punishment. As we heard last week, the leaders knew that they were the objects of the parable, but were afraid to arrest Jesus because the crowd loved him.

Chapter 22 begins with the story of the wedding feast that we just heard. I must confess that this is not my favorite parable. Judging by what I have read, I am not alone. This story is criticized for its brutality and for the aspects which make little sense in the context of the story. For example, in that day, a feast would involve two invitations. The first would be, "I'm having a party, plan on coming." Then, on the day, a second invitation would go out saying that the food was ready, please come to the table, now. If you couldn't attend or didn't want to, you usually refused the first invitation, not the second. The king's response to the refusals and excuses was to mount a military operation while still preparing the feast. This makes little sense. On top of that, he burns down one of his own cities! He then orders his servants to round up all the people on the streets, who would most likely be survivors of his attack on the city and 're-invites' them. When the king enters the hall, he finds a guest without the proper attire and banishes him. Some of this we can, no doubt ascribe to the time frame of the story. The original audience for the story would not be as surprised or put off by the story as we are, with our modern day sensibilities, according to Pastor Ed Markquart from Grace Lutheran Church in Des Moines, WA. Some of this can probably be ascribed to Matthew. The Aramaic phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is used seven times in the gospels. Six of those seven are by Matthew. He is more preoccupied with punishment than the other gospel writers. Luke is the only other gospel writer who repeats this parable. His version is more in keeping with our modern sensibilities as Markquart sees it. The NIV translation of Luke 14: 16-24 goes as follows:

16 Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. 17 At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' 18 "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please

excuse me.’ 19 “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ 20 “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ 21 “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ 22 “‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ 23 “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. 24 I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

One of the traditional interpretations of this story is the futility of making excuses to not answer the call to Christian life. The excuses are more prominent in Luke’s version as is the inclusion of the “poor, crippled, blind and lame” at the banquet. Actually the banquet guests in Luke’s version are central to the story. Matthew speaks of only of “both the good and the bad”.

Matthew’s version is under going re-interpretation lately. Most of the attention centers on the guest who was not wearing the provided wedding robe. This part of the story does resonate for me. When I was going into my junior year of high school, my parents and I took a family vacation to the east coast. As part of the trip, we went into New York City for a day. My folks decided to have lunch at Rockefeller Center. This is the open area that is below street level where the NBC Christmas tree is set up and where they have ice skating, in the winter. Since it was summer, there is open air dining at the restaurant there. When we went into the restaurant, we found that gentlemen were required to wear a coat. The management did offer us the loan of some busboy’s jackets which would magically transform us into acceptable customers. At my age, I would rather have died than to do that. My dad was oblivious to the disgrace of wearing a busboy’s jacket and insisted that we eat there. I have to admit that I still remember the sandwich that I ordered as one of the best that I have ever had. I guess that Matthew’s ill clad guest

might have been me, if I had insisted on refusing the offer of “proper” attire. But, then, I would have missed out on one of the most memorable meals of my life.

One of the contemporary re-assessments by Roy Tarry sees it this way, the king expects support from his allies, the original invitees. He doesn't get it and so he destroys them and invites new allies to the feast. But there is a catch: they must conform to the king's expectations. There is one holdout who remains true to his beliefs and he pays the ultimate price for his behavior. Others in the group of new assessors are working to make the ill clad guest into the suffering servant model. There is a long and well reasoned paper by Marty Aiken from Yale University that argues for the suffering servant interpretation. Critics of the new approach, however, argue that the suffering servant interpretation turns the parable “on its head”.

Since Matthew and Luke are the only two gospel writers who tell this story, most scholars seem to agree that the historical document “Q” is the original source of the story. I must admit that, after all of this, I prefer Luke's version, with its inclusiveness, including us gentiles. If you look at the place that the parable has in the chain of events leading up to the crucifixion, Matthew's version is more likely to provoke the religious leaders into action against Jesus. In order to fulfill the prophecy, I think that's the whole idea. Amen.