



“Living la Vida Loca”

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Matt. 22:1–14 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading is challenging for most of us, if not deeply troubling. There appear to be themes expressed in the Parable of the Wedding Feast that do not sit well with a church and a denomination that says: “Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey...you’re welcome here.”

What is a progressive pastor to do with a passage like this?

Give it a wide berth? Maybe preach on the Old Testament or Epistle readings, instead of the Gospel on this Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Year A? Maybe preach on Luke’s version of the parable rather than Matthew’s, since Luke smoothed off some of the rough edges of the parable in his version. Another approach would be to simply refute Matthew’s text by preaching against its apparent judgmental message, showing how Matthew’s telling of the tale must be understood within the larger context of the gospel message about God’s universal grace.

All three options are viable and valid in our tradition. I have known colleagues who have taken one, two, or all three approaches, and I myself have tried all three at one time or another in the past—but not today.

Today, I am not going to pass over Matthew’s text or the challenging themes that are expressed in it, primarily because we do a disservice to Jesus’ teachings and the scriptures as a whole when we try to create our own *Reader’s Digest* versions of the Bible. And, more importantly, I have found that pressing into troubling texts, like Matthew 22, has provided me—and hopefully you—with a greater opportunity for learning and growth than the passages that we find palatable. So here goes.

II

Let’s take the passage apart one challenging movement at a time. So that we don’t miss any of the hard or confusing parts, I will retell the story, like I am running a cassette tape recorder.

Once upon a time, Jesus spoke to his followers 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.

[Pause.]

Who is the king?

Biblical scholars generally agree that the king is a euphemism for God.

Now, who are the slaves?

Scholars generally agree that the slaves were the prophets, who were called to announce the wedding feast, and who fulfilled their charge; but despite their faithfulness, the invitees did not *R.S.V.P.* on time, or else they sent in their regrets.

[Play.]

Again the king sent other prophets, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: I've procured the choicest ingredients and prepared the finest foods. Dinner's ready. Come to the party.' But the invitees blew off the invitation and went away: one to his farm, and another to his business, while the rest seized the prophets and mistreated and killed them.

The king was enraged by this overwhelmingly negative response to his hospitality. So he sent his soldiers after the naysayers and destroyed the cities that they inhabited.

Then the king repeated his instruction to the surviving prophets, and sent them out to the highways and hedges and told them to invite anyone to the feast whom they encountered, including the good, the bad, and the ugly.

On the day of the feast, the king came out to greet his guests, and noticed that there was a man in the courtyard who was not properly dressed for the occasion. So the king asked the man how he had gotten in the gate. The man was speechless.

Then the king said to his 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."

III

So much for, “Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey...”

The sharp contrast between the king’s treatment of the improperly dressed wedding guest and the overarching gospel theme of hospitality inspired me to go digging in the scholarly literature to learn more about this text.

In the course of my studies, I discerned that the Parable of the Wedding Feast was probably *not* told in order to teach us about God and how God deals with us on Judgment Day. But, instead, Jesus mostly likely told this parable to inspire his audiences to reflect on their (and on our) behavior in relationship with God’s invitation to the feast.

Jesus told this tale to remind us that we have choices in life—to point out that some of the choices before us are healthier than others—and to encourage us to make the best choices.

Note, for example, that the marginal notes in *The Learning Bible* (which is the version that we present our Confirmation students) that persons of wealth likely provided their guests with wedding clothes if they did not have the proper dress. So, if a wedding guest arrived improperly dressed, his or her improper dress would have been a sign that the guest had rejected the host’s offer of a new suit of clothes—and ultimately the guest had rejected the host’s hospitality.

To put a point on the matter in light of the parable, the improperly dressed guest created his own hell. He caused his own banishment from the wedding feast, because he chose *not* to accept the full measure of the king’s hospitality.

Did you hear that? The bum at the banquet was offered a fine robe, but he refused to put it on. He was the actor—he was the agent—he was the decider of his fate. The unaccepting invitee was the one who determined his exclusion from the feast, not the king, not God.

IV

Let’s think about our own lives for a few moments. If you and I are like most people, we are slow to recognize the power we have in relationships: the power to say “yes” and the power to say “no,” the power to choose which path we take in life, and the power to choose a different way of being in relationship with another person or group.

Sometimes we allow ourselves to believe—more often than is truly the case—that someone else is in control of our lives, our decisions, and our destiny, as though we were pawns on someone else’s chessboard or actors on someone else’s stage—

when in fact, we are the masters of our moves. We are the deciders directing our lives.

Today's gospel reading points to the multiple opportunities offered to the king's wedding guests and to the power that each of us has in most cases to choose how things turn out in our lives. Today's parable begs these questions:

1. Do we bury our wedding invitation in a pile of mail and forget to return the *RSVP*?
2. When the follow-up call comes inquiring about our attendance and asking whether we'll have the surf and turf or the vegetarian entrée, how do we respond?
3. Do we let our chores or our work lives get in the way, or worse—are we outright rude to the host?

I've often heard speakers at stewardship conferences say, "You can ask a person what their values are, and they may tell you; but if you really want to know about a person's values, ask to see their check book ledger."

Sit tight. I'm not going to ask to see anyone's checkbook ledger, but I am asking you to think through this exercise with me. Let's consider our own checkbooks for a moment. If we opened our checkbook ledgers right now and scanned through the entries for the last month or year, what would this exercise tell us about our priorities? What message does our checkbook ledger convey about what matters most to us? Are we comfortable with the results of our analysis? If not, what are we going to do about it?

While we're on the topic of priorities, let's think about our calendars too. For many of us—particularly those of us who are in the workforce—the hottest commodity in our lives isn't money. It's time.

Think about how you spent your time this past week, month, or year. If a complete stranger got hold of your Franklin Planner or your Google Calendar, what would that person conclude about your priorities? Would they find a wedding feast on your "dance card" or would your calendar tell a different tale?

Whether we are comfortable with the answers that such a candid analysis of our checkbooks and calendars implies, the point is the same for all of us: we are (to greater or lesser degrees) the masters and mistresses of our own destiny, and according to Matthew's version of the parable—we are the makers of our own messes.

My friends in 12-step movements have pointed out to me on more than one occasion that active addicts and "dry drunks" are the last people to claim their own

agency in the messes that they make. Everyone else is to blame for their drinking and drugging and the repercussions associated with their addictions. Just ask 'em. They'll tell you.

Active addicts and dry drunks hear the invitation to sobriety and a healthier lifestyle, but those who are deep in their denial and disease will not be able to accept and maintain sobriety, unless and until they are held accountable for their behavior—which often involves experiencing the full consequences of their behavior.

The king in the wedding feast parable may be compared with the family member or friend of the addict who demonstrates “tough love” and says, “You can't come back to this job, this house, this marriage (you fill in the blank) until you start making better choices.

Yesterday, Rob Parrish and I attended a UCC Conference in Lodi called “Church Day.” Rob attended some workshops about UCC identity, and I participated in a routine, but required, Safe Congregation training for pastors about setting and maintaining professional and organizational boundaries.

There were nine clergy in my workshop on advanced boundary training who represented significant diversity in terms of life experiences and cultural backgrounds. The more experienced clergy in the group, which was a little over half of us, had faced a wide range of challenges in ministry, including confronting addicts, setting clear Safe Congregation policies, cleaning up after embezzlers, and coping with the chaos that people with certain kinds of personality disorders can unleash on a congregation.

In the course of our conversations, a couple of the older pastors asked the facilitator, the Rev. Dr. Kibbie Ruth, why some of our congregations seem to have a higher percentage of wounded people in them, who in turn wound others, and whose behavior can be so unhealthy that the very existence of a congregation can be threatened.

Kibbie turned the question back on the group, and asked us for our collective response. One experienced pastor opined, “I think our “God Is Still Speaking” slogan is very attractive to especially troubled people.

Another pastor who serves an ONA church with a lot of people in recovery and at least one registered sex offender, replied, “I offer the GISS greeting every Sunday. I say, “You're welcome here....,” and then I add, “...but not all behavior is welcome here.”

The seasoned pastor went on to explain that congregants are expected to treat each other in healthy ways that build up the body of Christ and its members and friends. Her point was well taken, and I suspect that more than one of us will be following her example.

Today's gospel reading is a reminder that Christ saw the need to offer instruction to his followers about appropriate behavior, and to remind them that they had the power to affect their own futures by the choices that they made—both good and bad.

Opting in to appropriate behavior patterns was cause for the people of lowest estate to be granted a seat at the head table, while the king's "first tier" friends who passed on the wedding invitation cut themselves from the guest list.

In a church context, we not only can opt into the wedding feast, but we can also hold each other accountable for the behaviors that make our church a hospitable—and a safe—place for everyone. We can and—according to the gospel—we should choose and expect behavior from ourselves and others that builds up our community and enables us to extend God's invitation to all people.

V

Perhaps the three biggest challenges in facing and making healthier choices in our lives are these: 1) noticing that we have power, 2) developing an awareness of our options, and 3) accepting the best invitations when they are offered the first time.

My suspicion is that most of us have learned, in retrospect, that there may be some warning signs earlier in our lives that we were on the verge of making poor choices that would head us in a bad direction. And for whatever reason, we did not, even though those signs were going off like the flashing lights and ringing bells that we associate with a railroad crossing just before the gates come down and a train crosses the intersection.

Maybe those signs remind us of the lyrics of Latin pop artist, Ricky Martin's hit "Livin' la Vida Loca"—living the crazy life. In Martin's song, the crazy life has to do with the musician's infatuation with a dangerous woman, but many other circumstances could apply here. Anytime we sense that someone else or some other force is controlling us and our destiny, we are living the crazy life. In times like these, we need to pay special attention, and notice that choices (or corrective actions) that we need to take so that we do not miss the wedding feast that God intended, and so that we do not create our own hell.

This work that I propose is not easy work; but it is essential work if we are to achieve the balanced life that most of us crave, and if we are to enjoy the fullness of life that God intended for all people.

Friends, in the name of our Heavenly Host, I am pleased to say, "Come to the feast! Come and enjoy all that God has prepared and intended for you, and for all." Amen.