

LIFE CHOICE

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Isaiah 25: 1-9 - A feast for all nations
Matthew 22: 1-14 - Parable of the wedding banquet

This parable is one of the most powerful and beautiful stories, and it's good that the children are learning it although it does contain a few challenging bits. I thought it was important to start off looking at that Isaiah passage because it certainly gives a background as to where the thinking, the idea, the picture, began. The pictures or the images of the Bible grow over hundreds of years, and we can watch how the ideas evolve even within the New Testament itself.

This picture that Isaiah paints comes from a time when there were real enemies--the people were threatened by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians, they were put into exile, they were oppressed. And so that passage begins with a celebration of God destroying the city--the city of the enemies, the brutal ones. Even there it has this animosity, and yet the passage moves to a picture of a feast, on the holy mountain, for all the nations of the world, and even death swallowed up. And those are motifs that of course are followed all the way through, and we can recognize them showing up in the New Testament as well, and in the gospels as well as in Paul's writings.

Something has happened between that Isaiah prophecy and the time of Jesus. Something changed after the people were defeated by the Babylonians, taken into exile, and then brought back to their home country to become a nation under the power of a foreign nation--and therefore in a very different historical and social circumstance. And out of that evolves the understanding of what is called "election"--that sense of Israel being the chosen people. And this idea of election is a motif that shows up also in that parable--many are called but few are chosen. It evolves, starting off with an arrogant attitude on the part of Israel feeling that God has chosen them as an expression of favour over the rest of the nations. And later, they develop a more mature understanding of election whereby they are chosen as an instrument through which God will touch the nations of the world with salvation. In other words, they become an instrument of God's universal salvation.

So that idea evolves and then we have, in Matthew, Jesus telling this parable which has a basic motif of replacement. A group of people took their election for granted to the extent that they didn't even bother to go to the banquet when the invitation came. Now, understand that parable against the background of the Isaiah prophecy. At this time of the fulfillment of God's promise, the time of the banquet finally came and the people were too busy to attend. And so you get this theme that they won't be the ones who thought they were chosen and had it in the bag. If they don't come to the banquet, the invitation will be handed to someone else. So this replacement motif emerges. But there's more in Matthew here. There's a brutality in this story, and the version of the

parable to which we're accustomed doesn't have that brutality. Was that a surprise to you? You thought it was a nice story about people making excuses--I got a cow, I got a new wife, I've got business to attend to. The response? Okay, we'll invite others. So others get to come in and they have a wonderful banquet. Well that's the version of the parable in Luke, the version with which you are familiar.

The four gospels are actually not the only gospels. There are lots of others. One that has become very, very, much a focus of attention recently is the Gospel of Thomas. That Gospel contains the same parable but in a form very much like Luke's--a simple replacement motif without all that brutality. Scholars conclude that the form in Luke, the benign form with which we are most familiar, is likely the way Jesus originally told the parable. The form in Matthew, they maintain, evolved during the early church after Jesus' time because it reflects the environment of persecution of that early church. The problem now was not just that some people ignore the call to the banquet. It is that there is an active and brutal resistance, an attempt to oppress it, which is what the early church experienced.

What do we make of all this? In discussing the parable with Mary Ann we found that the Sunday School program has chosen the Matthew version. Why? Who knows? It's harder to teach to children. And the key verse, the final one--many are called, few are chosen--sounds kind of judgemental and brutal. And so Mary Ann has chosen to move the Sunday School program more to the Luke version. I could have done that today, too, but I thought we would look at both versions. We'll look at the parable itself, but look at it dynamically at how it has developed.

If you notice, it's a fantasy kind of development. Here's the guy who has his banquet ready. Now in those days there was kind of a double invitation. People would have been told well in advance, so they knew this was coming up; and when the banquet was actually on, servants would have been sent to tell the people it was now time to come. In other words, when the servants were sent to say the banquet was ready, it was not that the guests just got invited. They had known about it for a long time. But they kill the servants--the messengers. Now according to the story, when the banquet is ready with the candles burning, the meat hot, and so on, the king assembles his army, sends them out to destroy all these people, and then returns and continues with his banquet. So the time frame is a little bit unfitting.

As I contemplate that, I think it's an expression of the power of the gospel. You have people who are attempting to suppress it, to resist this good news that's being proclaimed. And I think that's a way of saying the gospel, the church itself, is an expression of God's presence in the world. There isn't any force in the world that can successfully suppress it. The power of the sacred that is behind the church and the gospel is far greater than anyone's attempt to resist it. So it's not going to die. That gets expressed in those brutal images, and sometimes I think that sort of thing comes from dreams. You know dreams don't have any limits on what can happen. That sort of thing happens in dreams. And so we're dealing with a spiritual truth that has been added or has evolved later--after Jesus' time and the experience of the early church.

Matthew has also added on this little tag at the end which wasn't in the original parable but shows up in other places as well. It's an aphorism from that time--many are

called, few are chosen. But the word “chosen” links back to the Old Testament and the whole idea of election or being chosen. That’s difficult for us because how can it be that God has called everyone but then actually rejects some and chooses others? That takes us beyond Matthew’s time into the whole history of the church especially, for example, John Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. The church has carried that to an extreme in the sense that some choose the gospel--choose to commit their lives to Christ--and others don’t because God has foreordained how it will be. Now that’s difficult for us because we want an understanding that there is an element of free choice. And yet, if we go to the opposite extreme and say human beings are entirely free and responsible for their own choice, that doesn’t make sense either because why would some turn away. The fact that some turn away and reject the gospel is simply the tragedy of life.

This dichotomy between predetermination and free will remains paradoxical. We can’t resolve that in a simplistic way. It remains a paradox. It seems that we have a free choice, and yet it seems that somehow we are predestined. It’s not that there are two contradictory things. The truth is singular. It’s just that, from the point of view of our experience of life and our minds, it looks like two contradictory ideas. But we can’t resolve that. We need to hold that line as simply the observation--the great mystery--that when the Messianic banquet is finally offered, which is the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation, and the invitation is extended to all, some accept and some don’t. And what Jesus is adding is that it’s a bit surprising that the ones we thought would be in, aren’t, and the ones that we thought would never have a chance, are there at the banquet. We just leave it at that; we just leave it at the mystery of that choice.

Matthew goes on to the next stage which also reflects the early church. Of those who have chosen to join the church, to accept Christ, to be part of this new thing, not all stay. Some of them have said they are there, but somehow they don’t really accept it and they get kicked out. According to the story, they get kicked out for not dressing properly. We could turn that into the importance of dressing nicely for church, but we would be missing the point!

Now this gets us, I think, even closer to the heart of the matter that we are dealing with here. We need to understand that in those days there was a way to dress at a wedding banquet. They were talking about the proper kind of attire, and we need to look at that in terms of how we dress. We’re not quite as rigid as that sounds, but we do have different ways of dressing. There’s a way to dress for a wedding reception, and there’s a way to dress for work. And I’m guessing that the image Matthew is portraying there is a picture of somebody showing up at a wedding banquet in work clothes. But it’s not an elitist thing. I think it’s something quite different. I think it’s that the person who is still in work clothes is still caught up in the work, in the daily obligation, in the burden of life; whereas the mood of a wedding banquet, this celebration, is a stepping apart from the daily grind of life.

It is significant that this is a wedding banquet. (The Old Testament image, and even the Luke version, is just a feast.) A wedding is one of the deepest and most universal symbols of that ultimate integration of the wholeness of life--the joining of opposites into wholeness. And so it is one of the most beautiful images of salvation. In John, of course, Jesus is at the wedding banquet at Cana. That’s another motif that runs all the way

through. What we're talking about here is a picture of the promise--the promise of life that comes together in this wholeness and the fulfillment and celebration.

The church turned this bit about the clothes into the notion that even some of the people in the church aren't sincere. In other words, some of them aren't working hard enough, aren't committed enough, don't believe hard enough. And that's the inevitable tendency in our humanness--to turn everything into a burden and guilt, something about which to get all heavy and accused. In some ways that is easier. I could very easily turn that passage into a guilt trip and a condemnation and an accusatory sort of thing. Perhaps you thought I was going to do that because I'm standing in the pulpit today [rather than where he usually preaches, on the steps beside the pulpit]. You know, it would be easier for some people to go home carrying a guilt trip. It would be easier for some people rather than to hear the gospel proclaimed as the challenge to lay down their troubles, to lay down their work for a moment, to step into the banquet, to relax, to celebrate the beauty of life, to stop working, to stop feeling guilty, and just to know that they are loved and that God welcomes them into the banquet.

Much of our spiritual writing talks about things like ladders--climbing Jacob's ladder, or making it step by step through the process of working out our salvation. And it's all hard work. One of the medieval mystiques, perhaps it was Hildegard but I'm not sure, said salvation is much more about letting go and sinking into God. What a different way to picture it. It's not that there is no more work, it's not that there is no more trouble, it's not that all of that ends. It doesn't, and a gospel that tries to proclaim that it does--that we all just get together and put happy smiles on our faces and pretend everything is fine--has been sentimentalized into nothing. It's a very real engagement. Listen to the brutality in these stories. This is real, and if we think that's distant from our lives today, that's just because we in this part of the world live in a pretty artificial environment. Most of the world is up against the brutality and the starvation. That's real, that's normal. It's not that the rough stuff isn't there. We still have our troubles, we still have our work, we still have the burdens of our lives.

But God has given us the promise that makes it possible for us to lay all that down, to change out of the work clothes, to put on the gown for the celebration, and to attend the banquet and for a moment celebrate what has not yet happened but which, at the heart of life, has already been accomplished--the banquet of all peoples gathered in peace and joy and celebration. So for a moment we can just let go and sink into God and celebrate the promise. And that's the heart, that's the very core, of this banquet to which Jesus invites us over and over again--simply, to come to this table and partake of this simple bread and wine, and to let it be the feast of the nations, the celebration of God's promise.

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