

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
12 March 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Third Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“No Regrets”

Third in the Lenten Series, *Courage & Kin-dom* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 22:1-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

I suppose it’s too late for a content warning on this scripture. Perhaps you noticed that today’s text is more likely to “afflict the comfortable” than it is to “comfort the afflicted.”

And yet it is our lesson for today, so we are invited to lean in, listen deeply, and see what we can learn. And heaven forbid we send our regrets to an invitation Jesus’ risked his life to extend.

A traditional reading of today’s parable would have us read God as the king / Jesus as the king’s son / the wedding banquet as the “heavenly banquet” at the end of time / the prophets as the slaves who deliver God’s message to the ‘A list guests,’¹ / the ‘A list guests’ as the Israelites who “kill” the prophets for their message / and the ‘B-list’ guests from the streets as the ‘church today’ – full of good and bad

folks...some who follow the rules – and a few strays who don’t wear the right ‘clothes’ – meaning they ‘talk the talk but don’t walk the walk’ – and therefore are cast off.

In that interpretation, all the loose ends of this parable are tied up – neat and tidy, and we, as the church today, can read ourselves as those who are enjoying the fine food at the wedding banquet – not perfect people, but a mix of good and bad – just doing our best, enjoying God’s blessings. We are the ones who did not send our regrets to the invitation; we accepted! Done and done. The message is clear: all are welcome! (as long as we accept the invitation the first time, arrive on time, wear the right thing, and behave the right way!!!)

This leaves us pretty comfortable though as “the

¹ Debbie Thomas, “The God Who Isn’t,” *Journey with Jesus* (4 Oct 2020), accessed on 12 March 2023 at

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2777-the-god-who-isn-t>.

church.” And it leaves us with a whole lot that still doesn’t add up. First, it’s nearly impossible for this traditional reading of the text not to be anti-Semitic. As Debie Thomas writes, *“Think about it. Once again...the Jewish people get everything wrong, lose their coveted place on God’s A list, and take a backseat to the more faithful and more deserving (gentile) church. What a dangerous and wounding angle on the story — an angle that participates in the long, bloody history of the church’s abusive relationship with the Jewish people from whom we come.”*²

THAT is reason enough to search for alternative meaning in this parable. But even beyond that, this traditional interpretation really glosses over the gory details of what we just read! Seriously? Is God that violent of a tyrant?

But – before it gets ugly – it begins quite lovely, doesn’t it? An invitation to a royal wedding! Who doesn’t love that?!

Perhaps you’ve been invited to a fancy affair before. The kind of event that requires a very thick

envelope that, when it arrives in your mailbox, you are fairly certain a small tree gave its life to make that invitation possible.

You open the thick outer envelope, and pull out another envelope, both with gilded accents on the interior and complete with thin tissue paper between the layers of the invitation. You read the fancy calligraphy of details, perfectly scrolled across the ivory parchment paper, perhaps complete with a faint watermark of the family crest behind the script. There is a smaller card (of thicker cardstock) with directions to a reception venue and instructions on where a gift registry may be found.

And – there is yet a third smaller, stamped envelope enclosed with another card. Ah! *Répondez s’il vous plaît!* The R.S.V.P. card. There’s a place to list your name with your plus one, and a place for you to circle whether you want steak, salmon, or pasta. And below that, in smaller script, there’s a box you can check if, “with regret,” you cannot attend.

Now R.S.V.P. should just mean what it means. Please respond.

² Debie Thomas

But nowadays, one cannot trust that *Répondez s'il vous plaît!* will get a response. So we say, **“Please RSVP”** (which is redundant). Or **“RSVP Required”** (which is forceful and blunt but gets the point across: if you don’t tell us you’re coming, you’re not gonna have a seat, let alone salmon or steak!). Or **“RSVP by THIS DATE”** (slightly nicer; more like a “hint, hint” – we really need to know so we can plan!) Or the classic, **“RSVP, regrets only”** (which is convenient for the recipient, but truly not helpful or the host if you are actually wanting an accurate headcount).

Of course, for the king in Matthew’s parable, no R.S.V.P. would have been required because it was the *king* after all! In the social system of the day, the invited guests to this event would be other elite people who had power and privilege, who were notable or noteworthy – the rich and the royal, and the presumably LOYAL. It would be unthinkable for invited guests of such caliber to refuse the king’s invitation.³ This was *his son’s* wedding after all; the heir to the throne! So – for folks to

outright refuse to come – well, that was not just impolite manners, it was “open revolt.”⁴

It’s at *this* point, that the parable pivots from a lovely invitation to an awkward situation.

As his guests refuse his invite, the king gets irritated. Clearly the first slaves he sent out to gather the guests were “incompetent.” So he tries some other slaves, and gives them some more specific details to persuade: *You don’t understand. You see, I have already prepared for your presence – the steaks are on the grill, the halls have been decorated, the flowers have been cut, the silver polished, the orchestra has arrived and are turning their instruments, the dance floor scrubbed clean – “everything is ready” (v4) – you must come to this wedding!* His irritation implies foreseeable embarrassment. The king will *not* be made a fool at his own fancy affair.

But even upon second request, the guests don’t give a courtesy reply of “thanks but no thanks.” In fact, they are defiant in their reply – expressing no regret.

³ Stanley Saunders, “Commentary on Matthew 22:1-14,” *Working Preacher* (8 March 2015), accessed on March 12, 2023 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrativ>

e-lectionary/wedding-banquet/commentary-on-matthew-221-14-2.

⁴ Saunders, *ibid.*

They make fun of the king, snickering as they head off back to their lives, excuses rolling off their tongues, *“I’ve got to get back to the farm,” “Oh yes, I’ve got to get back to the shop.”* As if any businesses would be open or any farming would be happening on the day of such a royal occasion.

And it’s at *this* point, that the parable pivots again. Now it goes from an awkward story about a pitiful king who is desperately out of touch with his people to a horror show. These invited guests seize the slaves, (the messengers!), beat them, abuse them, and murder them.

Now let me just stop right here and say that anytime we read a parable about a king who owns slaves and we equate that king to God – we should have cause for pause because equating someone who enslaves people to the Divine flies in the face of all that we know to be true about the God who created us all in God’s beloved image. But all too often, we let ourselves and the gospel writers – and even Jesus – off the hook. Saying, well that was just the *“system of the day.”* As if that “system” was not compromised of real, flesh and blood people – people who were not able to live freely

as God created them. People who were literally bought, sold, used, abused, and murdered. To say something was just *“the way it was back then”* is to excuse abuse and slavery as something that people couldn’t help or that well, *“they didn’t know better”* – like a child who might eat one too many cookies and have a stomach ache – *“they didn’t know better.”*

It does not matter what age or time you are living in – past, present, or future – to be human and to not see another human being as beloved...and to think it’s okay to enslave them, own them, abuse, them kill them – is flat out wrong. It is evil. It is sin. And honestly it means that we’ve lost our own humanity and sense of dignity that we could treat another human without dignity or humaneness.

And when we fail to acknowledge that in our country’s history, and in our religion’s history, slavery was normalized in the name of God – then we just perpetuate harm and prevent healing. And we are naïve to the fact that many forms of slavery continue today; this is not just ancient history, it is lived experience with trauma and disenfranchisement that ripples through generations.

I'm stating what may seem like "the obvious" because it is really important to acknowledge that our biblical text – our holy scriptures – are full of images of that normalize slavery – that use stories of enslavers and enslaved people – and speak of that as if it is okay. And it is not. Slavery – of any kind and at any time – is abhorrent. Just because the Story of God's People is full of enslavers and enslaved people – that does not mean that the stories of these people always reflect God's heart or point to God or God's kin-dom. We, as God's people – beloved though we are – do not always represent God well. We do not always act or speak or make choices in line with God's love or God's image. We do not always represent God in the stories we tell or the ways we live our lives. And that is true for the Bible too – the people who are in it, the people who wrote it, the people who compiled it and edited it, and yes for the people like me who preach it, and yes for people like you who read it – We Do Not Always Get It Right.

So. (deep breath)

We must look again at "traditional readings" of the

text, and look again at the way we have "always understood things" – and ask ourselves – is that how God is speaking through this text to us today? Or is there a new message? Or more likely, do we need new ears to hear the message that has been there all along?

Jesus begins this parable by saying, "*The kingdom of heaven may be **compared** to...*" (v1). That doesn't mean he is *describing* the kingdom of heaven with this text. He might just be giving us the exact foil of the kingdom heaven...he might be giving us a picture of what it is NOT...*not* what it is. Jesus might be depicting the kingdoms of this world (it definitely seems so) and then showing us what happens when one refuses to acquiesce and comply to the abuse of power, the rule of the rich, the violence of the reigning regime. He might be showing us what it looks like when we confuse the kingdom of empire with the kingdom of God --- which, truth be told, is something we are want to do, generation after generation.

And this "foil" comparison makes even more sense when we remember what's happening in real time in Jesus' life story

right now in Matthew's gospel. The religious elite in the Temple are questioning his authority – literally in the verses that follow today's text, the Pharisees and the Sadducees are questioning Jesus and trying to entrap. These religious leaders live under the oppressive regime of the Roman empire, and it is the Roman authorities who will crucify and kill Jesus in just a few days.

If nothing else, this parable proves that people in power – even though they surround themselves with others in power who they think are their friends...well, when one turns on another...their true colors are revealed. The leader of *this* empire (this king) in the parable is violent. But even before *he* is violent, his peers are too. It is a culture of violence, power, unchecked authority. He does not exist in a vacuum, he is not just 'one bad apple.'

Even more, when the king hears that his slaves have been murdered – he goes from being irritated to irate. He responds with military force – murdering the murderers and burning their city. (Again – how could we accept a traditional reading of this parable with God as the 'king?' Today, it would be as if we were saying that God acted

like Vladimir Putin. Outrageous! Even for a story!)

At this point, the king is desperate. We can hear the hurt underneath the king's rage when he tells yet another group of slaves to just go round up whoever is out in the streets. He is hurt that his friends would so boldly deny his invitation. And he's hurt that he has to stoop to the level of inviting people off the street to come to his banquet – just so that he doesn't suffer the embarrassment of an empty banquet hall. And how outrageous and ego-driven is it that he would send his slaves out to gather people who are mourning their dead and looking for their belongings in the burning ruins of their city?! Essentially forcing them to go to a party thrown by the king who just took everything they had and destroyed it? Insane.

ASIDE: I do love how Matthew includes the detail that it is the slaves who decided that both "good and bad" people are invited to the wedding hall. The king says 'everyone'. The slaves decided that 'everyone' can mean 'anyone' – no matter their status or history.

Nevertheless, at this point the parable pivots again back to

something more palatable – even if just for a second – we breathe a sigh of relief and think maybe we’ll get a warm and fuzzy ending. We almost start to forget the violence because we’re so happy that everyone is joined together for this celebration – off of the burning streets and at least feasting in a banquet hall...but then – all the sudden there is a gasp! The music stops, heads turn, and – and ‘gasp’ (again) – someone is wearing the wrong outfit. Really?! The wrong outfit?! Could this be any more over the top!? Jesus knows we need hyper hyperbole for us to get the point, doesn’t it?

Because you see – remember – these people were from off the streets and their belongings were burned. So none of them would have had wedding robes of their own. The king would have provided them at the door. So – for a guest to NOT put on a wedding robe – well, what is that saying? It’s not because they didn’t have one or were not offered one. So why would they not put it on?

Well, what if he was making a statement? Being defiant?

Giving a silent protest if you will? This guest could not NOT attend this banquet – as to not attend is to be killed – but if he was going to attend he was not going to go along with all the pageantry as if it was “okay.”

The king is furious when he confronts this defiant guest – and he instructs him to be *“bound hand and foot and thrown into utter darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (v13).

Could it be that in this parable Jesus is not the king’s son...but Jesus is the one guest who refused to put on the trappings of the empire,⁵ who would not put on a garment of power and privilege that would politely cover up his tattered clothes that reeked of the smoke of his burning city? Could Jesus be the one who – when confronted by the authorities for not following “the rules” – is bound and thrown out and I don’t know, crucified and killed for refusing to bow down to Rome? Killed for pointing us to a kin-dom beyond *this* kingdom.

I invite you to consider today that to accept an invitation to the

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Sermon on the worst parable ever,” *Goodreads* (10 Oct. 2011), accessed on March 12, 2023 at

https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/1634206-sermon-on-the-worst-parable-ever.

kin-dom of God is to act boldly and courageously in the face of injustice and power and privilege and say “*I will **not** participate in this. I will **not** be a part of it.*” To say YES to God’s kin-dom is to say NO to the kingdoms of this world that put some people above others, that protect privilege for a few while denying rights for all, that keep wealth growing exponentially for some while poverty grows exponentially for others, and that allow tyrants to burn and destroy entire villages and countries just because they want more land, more control, more power.

Forget about RSVP-ing to the kin-dom of God. We’ve all been invited, and God really isn’t interested in accepting any regrets to the invitation. God will just keep inviting us until we accept – because that’s just the kind of grace-filled God of second and third and umpteenth chances we have.

The question is not whether we will accept the invitation or send our regrets. The question is ***IN accepting the invitation to God’s kin-dom in heaven, will we have NO REGRETS in how we show up and speak***

out to build that kin-dom here on earth?

This parable reads with an urgency that is disturbing. Especially when you know Jesus is about to be cast out of the crowd and crucified on the cross. We are all called to follow Jesus, but will we choose to follow his example – no matter the cost?

As Rev. Nadia Bolz-Webere asks, “*What if the kingdom of heaven is like someone who is hog tied for not participating in the charade of pretending God is OK with the powerful victimizing the weak? What if the kingdom of heaven is like someone who is [hog-tied] and thrown [out] by the empire into the outer-darkness and what if the name of that outer darkness is [Golgotha on Good Friday]? ...where death is swallowed up forever and the world is changed?*”⁶

“If there is a king in the Gospel that looks anything like the God we gather to worship, it looks like the King called Jesus; the one who came not to be served, but to serve...the one who was the unexpected embodiment of truth – the kind of truth that

⁶ Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*

disarms the powerful”⁷ and upends all that we know about how the world works.

It takes courage to follow Christ and create God’s kin-dom here on earth.

Perhaps more than any other quality – we see Jesus living his life for God and God’s kin-dom with no regrets. Even as he was tempted in the desert, Jesus did not give in to hunger, thirst, or lust for power or control. Even as he was breaking social norms by healing on the sabbath, talking with women, and touching lepers, he continued healing – putting people above procedure, personhood above policy. Even as he was betrayed and denied by friends, he extended love and compassion and second chances. Even as he was questioned by religious authorities, he kept teaching and preaching. Even as he was dying on the cross, he forgave his killers.

Friends, it is okay to have regrets in life. We all have done things we wished we hadn’t. Or not done something we wished we had. Regrets about how we behaved are part of being human. The deeper question is –

will we have *no regrets* in how we lived our faith? In how we made up for our mistakes, took accountability for our missteps and blind spots, and took responsibility for our actions moving forward? **Will we have no regrets in how we gave our all – in building the kin-dom of God for ALL?**

Will we act in boldness – refusing to put on the wedding robe...the garment that feels pretty comfortable or comforting to us – even when it represents and continues oppression for others?

There are lots of fancy events we could attend in this world. But there is only one kin-dom that needs our attending.

The kin-dom of God is not a “one and done” event; it calls for our continual courage.

So...How will you respond to the invitation that really matters?

Hopefully – with no regrets.

Amen.

⁷ Bolz-Weber, *ibid.*