

Take A Break for A Dinner Party

Thursday July 2, 2026 + Whitehorse Worship and Arts Festival + Matthew 22:1-14

I have a friend, a mediator, who tells me that when you hit an impasse in mediation, the best thing you can do is to break for dinner. She tells me that, more often than not, the act of watching that person who you see as the undesirable other, of watching them messily chew their food or have to fumble with their cutlery humanizes them just enough to remind you that they are more than the sum of the issue that is dividing you. *[pause]*

Jesus is not telling *this* story of the wedding feast – supposedly about the Reign of God - to the crowds. He's decidedly *NOT* at an intimate table with his oft-bumbling followers - *nor* is he feeding the hungry masses with loaves and fishes. He's telling it in the temple – and speaking right to the religious leaders – that is, to us.

The verses immediately preceding the reading tell us that the priests and pharisees know darned well that Jesus is talking about them. They even want to arrest him, and would - if it weren't for his popularity amongst the masses, that is. And again, in the verses that follow this parable, he's still there sparring with them.

As then, as Jesus so often does, Jesus tells us a story – a so-called parable.

I don't know about you, but often, when I hear Jesus' parables - my first impulse is to take them as either a cut and dry morality tale - or as a straight-ahead allegory. Which means I either need to dismiss them as terrible or wrong - or make them affirm just how right I am.

Let's take a slight detour further east before we go on here. Some of you will know of the koan (k-o-a-n - it's often spelled) in the Zen tradition of Buddhism. Forgive me for those for whom this is review, but in that practice, a teacher will say a line or tell a story or ask a seemingly unanswerable, paradoxical question in order to re-orient the student into something deeper about their own nature. Some students might spend weeks, years, an entire lifetime meditating on the koan their teacher has presented. The most famous koan, of course, is *what's the sound of one hand clapping?*

I'd like to suggest that Jesus' use of these little stories, where he invokes situations or images that would be familiar or relatable is akin to a koan; that is, a way to disrupt us in our expectations; to offer not a clean-cut solution – but, instead, to ask an open-ended question which provokes us into a deeper understanding of God & God's inbreaking reign.

And when I say 'us' I think that's especially true of this reading - because of who this parable was originally spoken to – the church leaders, the church bureaucrats, the people of religion and denomination and sect.

And so I wonder: What if, in telling this story, Jesus is seeking to disorient the religious hearers into something so profound, so incredible that it promises to change us. *[pause]* The parable starts in the way those of us who see ourselves as so-called progressives might like it. There's are party and the invited ones; the ones with connection and privilege and power – the capitalists - they go off to their barns and businesses, were told. They don't have time to party. They don't get that the party is the real deal. So, then, the doors are opened wide. "Go... into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ...[and so they] gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests." In our love of inclusivity and diversity and justice, we cheer. The first shall be last! Hurrah. Now, *this* is the Reign of God!

But then it gets *just* a bit tougher. The king's slaves - aren't our literal brains already uncomfortable that this King, representing our God, has slaves – in an act of revenge kills and burns, scorched earth, the property of the ones who hurt his slaves. So much for turn the other cheek, right? Ouch. And then, the real doozy – one of those poor saps who presumably wasn't first invited but comes anyways - gets singled out, bound, thrown out - and condemned to the outer darkness where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth".

And that's where it ends – "many are called – but few are chosen". Sucks to be you. Damn. Literally damn. Welcome to the Whitehorse Worship Arts Festival! Let's kick it all off right there.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, in a sermon preached during the Occupy movement and after the initial optimism of the Arab spring (anyone remember those days?), called this 'the worst parable ever' – and you can see why. I mean, this is not the God or Kin-dom that we want, right?

And yet. And yet - I do have to wonder. It's almost as if Jesus is using the koan to push us, especially us, the religious types, to find ourselves in the story? Tricky Jesus. Always clever.

As if to ask: Who are you at the wedding feast. Who am I? Am I the one who was invited, but was too busy come? Am I the one who came and partied it up?

Hmm. I think, if I'm honest, I'm often the one who makes it through the door, sure, but then wants to do it on my own terms. I mean, I'm happy to be at the party, but please, don't make me wear the silly hat – certainly not do the Chicken Dance or the Macarena.

Methodist scholar Alyce Mackenzie tells us that in ancient context into which Jesus was speaking, a wedding garment would be provided at the door to any who didn't have one. To not put it on was a profound insult to the honour of the host and the event – in this case, the wedding of a beloved child. It's to come to the party not prepared to party.

Episcopal priest and New York Times food columnist Robert Farrar Capon suggests, throughout his writing that the God of the parables – the God of the prodigal son and the wedding feast is a recklessly lavish God – not one that the gatekeepers of religion tend to like.

In reading this text, Capon suggests that the God of this parable is one who ‘makes hell unnecessary for anybody – the only catch being you have to be as [reckless and lavish and prodigal] as God in order to take the deal...That this party is thrown by a king that any real king would be ashamed of – a king that represents a God who refuses to act like one – and where there is a hell only for idiots who insist on being serious.” From *Parables of Judgement*, alt.

It’s as if that rather than putting on the campy party hat, we religious types want to take ourselves too seriously; to cling to our dear hermeneutics of suspicion, our pride in our titles and our own vestments and right rituals, the hard-earned jewels of our denominational identities. We want to gatekeep our theologies and ideologies - and even who gets to be at the party. Yes, *we* are the chosen, but we want to choose who is worthy of the feast of the lamb – “no foreigner shall eat of it... only one shall be circumcised to celebrate it” we gloat over the ancient texts, missing the entire arc of radical grace and mercy of the prophets when they tell us how much they hate our religious festivals!

All while the party of lavish grace is happening.

And the initially uninvited – all the good *and* the bad are all there, damn it.

As hard as it is for us to swallow (so to speak) – how hard it is for me to swallow, the MAGA cult and the fascists are sharing bread and wine with undocumented and trans folk and, hell, everyone seems to be having a good time.

They’ve broken up their fights and to rise to something higher – the mediation is ended and now is the time for transformation for the purgation of all hatred and violence; to live into something called the Reign of God, the reign of Shalom, the consummation of all things in Christ.

All while we, the religious leaders, have missed the good news of what happens when we break for dinner and when bread and wine are shared. *[pause]*

As the drama between Jesus and the religious types continues to unfold in the temple after he tells this story, the religious leaders, still determined to trick him, ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment. *Love God, and love neighbour* – they are told. It’s as if all the law and prophets – all the reason for religion hangs on love. Love one another as I have loved you, right? Imagine that.

How, then, might we read this koan – this worst parable - through a lens of love as we enter into this festival? How might it transform us in our religious hardness? What might it mean if we lowered our standards, put on our party hats, danced the chicken dance - and entered fully into the wild party of grace, that is, into the reign of God.

What if we celebrated the marriage feast of the One who came to offer this radical grace for the renewal of all things, so that all, the good and the bad, so that, ya even the busy capitalists might come in late, that even we religious types start to get it and come back from our outer darkness all transformed in love – so that all – the good and the bad - might eat together in Shalom. Now, that's a vision of the kin-dom that I can get behind.

Amen.