

October 11, 2026 • The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

The Rev. James Wyatt

Exodus 32:1-14 • Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23 • Philippians 4:1-9 • Matthew 22:1-14

Come to the Feast

OK, so, Jesus is on a bit of a tirade, here. This is his third parable in a row about God rejecting those who have failed to lead God's people in the paths of justice and righteousness. And the context, again, is that Jesus has just had his triumphant procession into the gates of Jerusalem, he's visited the temple and driven out "all who were selling and buying in the temple," and "overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves," (Matt. 21:12) and he's healed the blind and the lame who came to him there. And the chief priests and elders of the people challenged him—they said "By what authority are you doing these things?" And after humiliating them and refusing to give them a straight answer, he tells these three parables. First is the one about the two sons sent to work in their father's vineyard: one who said he would work to bring forth the good fruit of justice and righteousness but did not, and one who said he wouldn't work but did anyway. Second comes the one about the tenants in the vineyard who refused to pay rent by delivering the justice and righteousness that God requires. And now, finally, this parable of a king who gives a wedding banquet. All three parables deliver a similar message: that the kingdom of God belongs not to the religious establishment, the king's fancy friends, the leaders who have failed to produce justice, but instead to the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the poor and the marginalized, the unlikeliest of people, because they are the ones who are actually doing God's will, by bringing forth the fruit of justice and righteousness that God expects from us.

Now, I have said this in talking about each of these parables, and it's important enough that I need to say it again. There's a traditional way of understanding these three parables, which suggests that Christianity has replaced or superseded Judaism, that Christians are now the chosen people of God and the Jewish people are not. That is *not* what Jesus is saying here. The tax collectors and prostitutes who Jesus says will enter the kingdom of God ahead of the chief priests and elders were just as Jewish as those priest and elders, and Jesus himself said that he was sent "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" before he sent his Jewish apostles "to make disciples of all nations." The grace of God has *expanded* the people of God, not replaced one group with another.

But part of what is happening in this text is a result of Jewish communities near the end of the first century—years after Jesus's death and resurrection—trying to make sense of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The Roman province of Judea rose up in revolt in the year 66, and as the decisive act of putting down that rebellion, in the year 70, Rome razed the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple—just as Babylon had done 650 years earlier. And the people for whom that temple was the center of their religious life—which included followers of Jesus, at that time—had to make sense of that. They had to figure out why God let God's house fall, and what their religious life was going to look like without that house of God. One way they did that was to look back to the words of the prophets—Jeremiah, who saw the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Babylonian Empire as a sign of God's wrath, and Isaiah, who said the same thing about the fall of the northern kingdom and the destruction of Samaria a hundred and fifty years before, as well as prophets like Ezekiel and Zephaniah. So when the Gospel of Matthew tells us a parable about an angry God who "sent his troops, destroyed those murderers and burned their city," that's firmly in the tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah describing the wrath of God enacted by foreigners against a nation that had fallen away from God and failed to produce the justice and righteousness that God expects from the people of God. It's more or less a continuation of the story of the golden calf that we heard from Exodus this morning: over and over again in our scriptures, the people of God do something foolish, they turn away from God and worship other gods, and God's wrath "burn[s] hot against them." In Exodus, Moses pleads with God to restrain that righteous wrath, basically

saying, “You don’t want the Egyptians making fun of you, do you?” But Isaiah and Jeremiah and Matthew all lived through what they perceived as the wrath of God poured out on God’s people through the hands and swords of an enemy nation. They all lived in terrible times and survived the destruction of everything they held sacred. So even though I suspect that their trauma distorted their vision of who God is, I hesitate to judge them for it. It is hard for me to imagine living through what they lived through and coming through it with my idea of a loving God fully intact.

So the question I find myself grappling with is where, in the midst of all this trauma, this wrath and this bloodshed, is the Good News? Well, I see the Good News in the very first line of the parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” That’s what this is actually all about: a great feast celebrating the marriage of God’s son—Jesus, who describes himself more than once as a bridegroom whose presence is cause for celebration. The wedding and the feast happen almost entirely off-stage in this parable, and the parable doesn’t even talk about the son or his bride except, in passing, to explain what the celebration is about. And I don’t want us to lose sight of the fact that that’s what Jesus was about, for all his anger in this tirade, for all the language of bloodshed and violence in this and similar parables, and for all the trauma that the Jewish and early Christian communities endured in the ill-fated revolt against Rome, Jesus came in the midst of a foreign occupation that was marked by horrifying violence and torture and bloodshed and he partied it up at feast after feast after feast. And he invited everybody to sit with him at the table. While the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting to demonstrate their repentance, their sorrow over the sins of the nation which they believed had brought the wrath of God—in the form of the Roman occupation—down upon the nation, Jesus told them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?” (Matthew 9:15) He’s saying, in effect, God is not angry with us.

God is not angry with us. Whatever troubles we are enduring are *not* a sign of God’s wrath, which requires our fasting and penitence to avert. Jeremiah and many others after him saw the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem—both times—as a sign of God’s judgment on the people or their leaders, but Jesus didn’t point to an angry God who is offended by all our sin; he pointed to a joyful God who is delighted and celebrates when love and reconciliation happen. God is not busy punishing us, God is throwing a wedding feast to which we are all invited.

So then, what about that poor guy who gets pulled in off the street and brought in to a wedding feast he wasn’t originally invited to, had no plans to attend, and had no time to prepare for? He shows up in whatever he’s wearing, and the king once more lashes out in violence because this random guy is underdressed. What is Jesus trying to tell us here?

Well, look. The king’s representatives “went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.” Good and bad, we’re all gathered up and brought to the wedding-feast of Jesus the bridegroom. And good and bad, we’re all changed, we’re transformed as bit by bit we “put on Christ”—as the Holy Spirit clothes us in the likeness of Christ, perfecting the image of God in us. If we come to this feast, if we participate in the celebration of the bridegroom, but we’re unwilling to be changed by it, we’re unwilling to let the Spirit clothe us, then we are not really participating in that celebration. That’s what’s going on here, I think—not a threat of eternal punishment, but an encouragement to participate, to be part of the new creation that God is working in us and around us.

And what that participation looks like is summed up nicely in the end of Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”—clothe yourself in these things. These things are like fine garments appropriate for a wedding feast. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen.