

Redeeming Judgment

Maybe you saw the comic strip “Baby Blues” in last Sunday’s *Chronicle*. The dad, Darryl, is sitting in a chair reading a bedtime story to his youngest daughter, Wren, a toddler. “One more,” he says, and then starts reading the familiar nursery rhyme. “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do.” (Wren’s eyes grow bigger.) “She gave them some broth without any bread, then whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.” (Wren’s hair is standing on end and her eyes are huge.)

In the last square of the strip, Wren is standing in her crib looking angry. Wanda, the mom, speaks to Darryl. “Wren can’t seem to fall asleep.” To which he replies, “Weird.”

Maybe you’re thinking a similar thought in response to Jesus’ parable of the wedding banquet. If we’re paying attention, it’s definitely not a good bedtime story. It’s a disturbing story. Whoever thought it was a good one to include in the Bible?

It starts out just fine. A king is giving a wedding banquet for his son. But when the intended guests are no-shows, must they mistreat and kill the messengers who come to remind them? And then why does the king overreact, punishing not only the murderers but everyone else by sending troops to burn and destroy the city? Then there’s the final act of anti-hospitality, when the king kicks out one of the last-minute guests for not meeting the dress code?

Really, I much prefer Luke’s version of this parable. That telling emphasizes the inclusion of “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,” (Luke 14:21) and the foil for that version is anyone who wants to draw the line too tightly around God’s welcoming table. This version emphasizes the theme of judgment. It’s aimed at the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. But at the end, we all feel like we’ve been soundly whipped and sent to bed with only broth and no bread!

Let me first address the wrong ways that this parable, and others like it, have been used in Christian history. This parable should not be used as evidence that the Christian faith has replaced or superseded the Jewish faith. Jesus is not talking about all the Jewish people, to whom he and his disciples all belonged. Go back a few verses, and you will see that he is talking to the religious leaders of his day, calling on them to repent and listen to God’s prophets. That is not a new theme in the Bible, it is found throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Jesus is speaking in the prophetic tradition.

But by the time the gospel of Matthew was written in the latter portion of the first century, there was a lot of tension between those who were choosing to follow Jesus and those who were not, and this sectarian movement of Christ-followers within the Jewish community needed to define itself over and against the synagogue majority. This is what makes us different from them. The way the stories were told fit the needs of the congregations of the late first century. The way these same stories were used centuries later as justification for anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism is a sin of Christ’s people. We need to be repentant, and hyper-cautious, so as not to perpetuate that sin. (see Amy-Jill Levine, 2006, *The Misunderstood Jew*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, esp. p. 217)

But beyond that concern, there are other concerns provoked by this parable. If this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven, and God is the king and Jesus is his son, then this wedding banquet is a messianic banquet, a glimpse into the nature of eternity. So why is the king so violent? And why does he

judge the improperly dressed guest so harshly? The story leaves an uncomfortable taste in our mouths. It feels like the judgmental kind of Christianity we try to distance ourselves from. Where is the “love” which we believe in our heart of hearts to be the true gospel?

Maybe we are uncomfortable with “judgment” because we don’t want to lapse into judgmentalism. But judging is something we need to do every day. We need to use our minds and the teachings of our faith to make wise decisions. My ballot arrived in the mail yesterday. I will use my best judgment to fill it out. I hope every one of you will do the same. To abdicate the privilege of voting is not conscionable, especially this year. Our state and nation need thoughtful Christian people who listen to the guidance of our faith and exercise the awesome power of judgment by voting their conscience.

We make judgments every day. What to eat, what to buy, how to spend our time, how to treat others, how to take care of the earth, how to vote. Growing up means learning how to make good judgments. Our judgments are exercises in stewardship—we have one life to live, how will we live it? And our judgments display our ethics, or lack of ethics.

For the early hearers of Matthew’s gospel, the “robe” which the guest was missing could have meant only one thing—the baptismal robe, the garment which symbolized putting on Christ. Being transformed by God’s grace to live in commitment to Christ’s way. Being a Christ-follower, a Christian, in deed as well as word, belonging to Christ in life and in death. The ill-clad wedding guest who has nothing to say for himself represents the Christian-in-name-only who joins the party for the goodies but has no concern for the guest of honor, Christ himself. He is exposed as a fraud. He is the salt that has lost its taste, the rocky soil on which good seed landed, the weed among the wheat. He has wasted his invitation to the heavenly banquet, a poor judgment on his part. God sees, and judges with equity. Many are called, but few are chosen.

As for the violence of the king against the city, many scholars see this as a reflection of what happened to Jerusalem in 70 A.D., when the Romans quashed the city’s rebellion by burning down its Temple.

And yet in the parable, the banquet still went on. In the smoldering ruins of a pillaged city, amid the devastated hopes of a defeated people, the kingdom of heaven persisted. God’s mission, and the mission of Christ’s people, persisted.

My friends, this parable is speaking to us today a word of hope sandwiched between two words of warning. The first warning is not to turn away from God’s invitation to the feast of life in Christ. Listen to God’s messengers, who speak of the justice, mercy, and truth of living in covenant relationship with God. Isn’t that what we all desire? Many times in the scriptures, this is depicted as a meal provided by God. After Moses received the law and gave it to the people, he went with the elders of Israel to the top of the mountain, where they ate and drank with God. (Ex 24:9-11) The prophet Isaiah promises a feast of rich foods for all people. (Is 25:6-8) And the psalmist describes a relationship with God as a table prepared even “in the presence of my enemies,” in which “my cup overflows.” (Ps 23:5) It is too easy to take this invitation for granted, to be so caught up in the lives we make for ourselves that we miss the importance of the life God has waiting for us. Don’t make the mistake of Jesus’ first century antagonists, the religious leaders who took offense at his challenge to them. Accept Christ’s invitation to his way.

And accept it completely. The second warning is to take our baptismal covenant seriously, not simply to take the name Christian but to let its call transform your life. Baptism is a sign of unmerited

grace. It is wrong not to respond with humility, compassion, kindness, and gratitude. It is wrong to be governed by greed, arrogance, cruelty, and self-absorption. That's not judgmentalism. That is the judgment of God, which we all face. Choose your way of life in light of God's grace toward you. Choose, and make a difference in the life of world around you.

Because in the middle of these warnings is the message of hope. Remember the presence of God's banquet in the midst of despair. Hear the promise of God's providence in the face of disaster. Receive the gift of God's welcome even if you never knew that God knows you even exist. God does know you exist, God made each of us out of love and for love and to love, and God loves this whole world more than we can ever imagine. Every one of us, every one of our neighbors, everyone on earth is invited to share in God's abundance. We are all welcome. There are no restrictions on God's invitation. Picture the feast of rich foods, picture the mother feeding her child at her breast, picture the tearful father welcoming his wayward son home. All of those pictures combined tell us of God's sacrificial, welcoming love for us. This is the hope we have in Christ: that even while God has high expectations for good behavior, God's decision in favor of the world is broadly inclusive. God loves all.

That is the word of the Lord for our troubled world. That is the word of our Lord for our wayward lives. That is the word of God for us today.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. May it be so.