

## Staying Faithful in the Crowd

[Philippians 4:1-9](#)

[Matthew 22:1-14](#)

This is a difficult parable isn't it? The Kingdom of heaven is like a king who when people don't show up to his son's wedding and some of them even shoot the messenger, he becomes enraged and sends homeland security to kill them and burn their cities. Then he sends out his slaves again to invite people to his feast and having seen what happened to the first group of guests, everyone shows up. Now we can stop the camera rolling at this point, and make it a parable about how those who were first invited, probably the people of Israel, chose not to come and so the doors were opened to everyone, which is good news – except for the murdering and burning of cities.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. The king notices that one of the guests isn't properly dressed and he calls him out. Why aren't you dressed? He says. The man doesn't reply and so the king has him bound and thrown out into utter darkness.

Is this the way you expect God to behave?

It's not the way I expect the God I serve to behave.

So perhaps the King in the parable isn't God. There are some clues in the Greek which we lose in the translation. First Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven has been likened" – he doesn't say that he is saying what the kingdom is. And then he specifically says, "The kingdom of heaven has been likened to a man king". To a man king, not a God king.

Jesus was telling this parable in Jerusalem a few days before his crucifixion. When he was preaching in the temple courts, the chief priests and elders questioned his authority. He responded with three parables of which this is the third. After it we are told, "the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words." Jesus was great at saying more than he seemed to be saying.

Perhaps in this case, Jesus was subtly saying, "People often describe the kingdom of heaven as if God were like Herod." And apparently the wealthy and powerful people whom Herod has invited to the wedding think he's a clown. They aren't going to come.

It was customary to invite people to a wedding feast but not give an actual time because you didn't know for sure when the food was going to be ready, so you sent out save the date announcements and then when the meat was cooked and the caterers were ready, you sent word that it was time to come. The man-king sent word, and the people he invited declined to come.

It looks like their response was a political one – they didn't want to be associated with him or his son -and certainly the man-king treats it like a rebellion, sending his forces out to kill them and burn their lands.

And so then he saves face by saying that the people he had invited weren't worthy anyway. He sends out his slaves to get real people, solid patriots, to come and eat the prepared food. Is this really a movement of grace from a loving God? or is Jesus actually describing an egotistical attempt to get a good optic? Is it a way of speaking about the generosity of the feast of God, where the only thing that matters is that one answers the invitation and comes to the feast? Or is

it showing that the only thing that matters to this human king is a full room and the display of popularity?

And then we come to the final part where the man who isn't wearing a wedding outfit gets called out. He doesn't say anything in response to the man-king's question. And so he gets tied up and thrown out.

I don't know if it's true but I have heard preachers say that the king would have provided special wedding garments for the guests. So I have always imagined the room full of wedding guests in white robes and this one guy sticking out like a sore thumb. Let's say he's wearing blue. Everyone in white and one person in blue. I'm going to ask you to imagine that, and then to switch it in your mind so that everyone is wearing blue except for this one man in white. And when the man-king turns on him in accusation, he is silent. Does that remind you of anything?

It may have reminded some of those listening, of that verse in Isaiah about the suffering servant, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth." (Is 53:7)

I want to suggest to you that the man who stands out in the crowd, the one being picked on by the man-king, that that man is a picture of Jesus. Remember what happened when Jesus was brought before Pilate? "When Jesus was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge." (Matt 27:12-14a)

So we can read this parable not as a statement about who God is, but as a parable of resistance.

No-one successfully stands up against the tyrant. Not even Jesus. And the gospel writer knows, as we do, that a few days after he tells this story he will be bound up and killed on a cross, facing the darkness of death and the tomb.

But Jesus' refusal to wear the robes of the tyrannical man-king, his refusal to drink the Kool-Aid, and his silent non-violent protest lead beyond the darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth to the amazing and glorious resurrection. Out of his obedience to his calling, Jesus brings new life. Not just for him but for the entire Creation.

This is God's way. Not the path of vengeance, anger and tyranny. In the parable immediately before this one, Jesus talked about the tenants who refused to pay rent or to surrender the vineyard, and he asked his listeners, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" and they replied, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," but that was the wrong answer.

God's answer is a new creation. And we are part of that new creation. We are part of the reign of God which is here and not yet here, which is being formed in the crucible of our lives.

In this time of political upheaval, of fire and pestilence we are the ones who are called to resist. We are the ones who are called not to put on the mantle of the tyrant, not to dance to the tune of the empire or eat at the table of anxiety and fear. We are the one who are called to be peacemakers – to live peace in ourselves and to de-escalate the fear and anger around us.

In this run-up to an important election it is easy to get ever more caught up in the never-ending conversation coming from the media. It's their job to keep news coming 24/7 and so they have to generate news with new polls and on-going speculation. It is our job to refuse to get caught in the web.

We are the followers of Jesus, the real king, the real Prince of Peace. So in these times when so many are feasting on the diet of anxiety and fear which rapidly leads to anger and hatred, it is up to us to refuse to participate. To center ourselves in the love and peace of God. To redouble our spiritual practice, to pray, meditate, read spiritual books, find God in Creation and drink deeply of the waters of spirit.

As we heard in the second reading:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, 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.