



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The King Is Not God

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 12, 2014

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 22:1-14

Before I begin to unpack this troubling parable that Jesus tells, let me be clear about one thing: The king in this parable is not God. I may be going out on a limb here, because there has been this long-standing inclination in biblical interpretation to say otherwise. For centuries people have tended to read this parable quite charitably and say something like this: "Oh! What a gracious king this is! Look at what he did! He invited both the good AND the bad to his son's wedding. He didn't have to do that! How very much like our Lord, who gathers all sorts around this holy feast. Maybe I can have a place at this table. Maybe I can receive this grace, no matter how bad I've been. Maybe others can, too! All sorts! What a beautiful vision of heaven! All of us gathered around the table.

"Except for that guy, over there. That guy who didn't wear a wedding robe. What a weirdo. The king graciously invited this nobody to the royal feast, and what did he do? He couldn't even open up Emily Post and dress himself right. He stuck out like a sore thumb. And to add insult to injury, he wouldn't even speak to the king when spoken to! So stubborn. I suppose this illustrates the reality that people do have free will, and I guess that means that anyone can refuse the grace of God, no matter how abundant. They just can't handle mercy and forgiveness. Some people are so hard-hearted that, even at the great wedding feast of heaven, they look a gift horse in the mouth. And by their own choice, they're doomed to stalk the outer darkness, and weep and grind their teeth. Well, I guess some people just can't be helped."

You get the idea. I think one of the reasons that we have tended to read this parable this way is because we think that the king in this vision of the kingdom of heaven has to be God. Who else could the king be? I'll tell you who else he could be: A king like any other king of the time. A dictator like any other dictator in our own time. There are so many reasons for me to reject the thought that the king in this parable is meant to be God, at least the God that I have come to know.

For one, the king has slaves. He has surrounded himself with people who have become his property, stolen property at that. This king has imprisoned them without a cell, forcing them to do his bidding if they wish to live. In this case, they are the ones who are sent out to become macabre, living invitations.

And here's another big red flag: The king, no matter how he sells it, can't even get the people he wants to come to his son's wedding. Think about that for a moment. I presume that his first invitations went out to the nobility and the A-listers in the Social Register. Think about how badly it must be going for him that none of the elites want to be caught dead at his party. Some of them thought the invitation was a riot. And they teased the king's slaves and went about their businesses with a chuckle. Some of them even lynched the slaves, laughing at the thought that the king had any power worth considering.

The king, at this point, could have taken this as a hint. "Maybe, if I don't have the basic respect of the people, maybe I shouldn't be the ruler of this land." No. He goes in the other direction. Like the onslaught at the end of "The Godfather," the king kills all of his enemies, all of the murderers of his slaves. And not only that, he escalates the violence, an eye for an eye and then some, burning down the entire city. Whether they were good, or whether they were bad, the king's fiery anger did not discriminate.

And while the city was still smoldering, the king, at the height of his dreadful power, doesn't postpone the party. He issues a second invitation to the people of this ravaged land, to the ruined people of the streets, anyone the slaves could find, regardless of station. And this was really, like the Godfather, an offer that they can't refuse. Would you say no to this fearsome figure's invitation? Wouldn't you be exceedingly polite and wear the right thing if invited to this dragon's wedding party?

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, there was a dispute that Jesus had over whether Jesus' power came from divine or human authority. If the king of this parable is anything, he is the king of human authority. His is not a throne of grace. His is a throne of threat. He is the king of "or else."

And the people of Jesus' day would have been familiar with figures like King Herod and the Roman Emperor, who would have behaved in kind, ruling with a fiery sword, armies, slaves, with the best advertising, calling it the divine will. And these figures would throw stylish parties with all the celebrities every night. How does the truly divine break into a world like that? How does God break that spell?

Well, you see, according to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is like someone who spoils that party. This is where God acts in this parable. As a party crasher! Someone comes to the wedding party, this Red Wedding, yet does not wear the wedding robe that everyone else was wearing. Someone comes to the wedding and doesn't play along, doesn't go with the flow. "How did you get in here without a robe?" the king demands. "What? He won't even defend his behavior? Seize him! Tie him up and throw him into the outer darkness. If he will not feast with me, let the beasts make a feast of him!"

This is why it is so tragic that the king has been seen as God in this parable. This king is a jerk! A megalomaniac! And the most God-like, the most Jesus-like, figure in this parable is the quiet one who is cast out of the party. In a way, you could see Jesus, in his ministry, as crashing the party that was Jerusalem. Crashing the party by showing up in a city gone wrong, that didn't really want to hear what he had to say. Crashing the party by not dancing to its tune of crushing violence and abuse in the name of God and the Emperor. And, like the parable's party crasher, it was Jesus who was silent before his accusers. And it was Jesus who, like the interloper, was cast into the outer darkness, beyond the walls of the holy city to weep and gnash his teeth on the cross. But it is in the casting out of Jesus that we witness God's love in the midst of the worst of the world. We see a love that we maybe thought couldn't exist. This is a life and a love that even all the raging of the Thrones of Threat cannot destroy. Because it is a presence that becomes even more visible when you try to cast it out.

Like Jesus said earlier in the gospel, the stone that was thrown away has become the chief cornerstone. A kind of spiritual cornerstone of a kind of spiritual home that is built with things like mercy and grace and freedom, rather than rules and judgment and the fashion of the hour. This home is built by people who love the rejected ones and by people who have been rejected themselves, confident that God is with them because it is in Christ that God is rejected, too.

One of the reasons, I think, that Jesus made this parable so obscure, is that this understanding of God's weakness is so difficult to stomach for those who have only been used to hearing about a God of hideous strength. Even the disciples had a hard time making this leap, and they had front row seats. And so Jesus tended to write stories that could be read two ways, one with the old understanding of God and one with the new understanding of God making its debut on the world's stage.

For here's the continually surprising thing about the kingdom of heaven: We can find it on earth. And when it is revealed on earth, it's not typically in the ones that we lift up on high. The kingdom of heaven is especially revealed in the ones that we have cast down into the darkness, the ones who take the wind out of our sails, wear the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, the ones who crash our parties.

To see heaven we need to start looking not up, but down. We need to turn our eyes away from the sumptuous feasts of the tyrants and take the risk to look into the so-called darkness, to see the castoffs of our world. If we dare to do that, we can begin to see the kingdom of heaven not as a place that is ruled by a tyrant with people cowering in fear and going to parties because they have to, but as a place that is ruled by something more akin to a loving parent—less a lion and more a lamb. And God meets us in the outer darkness to build a new city, a city that no petty tyrant can scratch. And in the so-called darkness that used to be so scary, we find that the lamb is the light of that city, and in that city are a great company of those making their lives an offering of thanksgiving and praise to God and one another. And in that city God has sent us an invitation to a new kind of banquet. You have to admit, it's pretty simple fare. Some bread. Some wine. But, thankfully, it's not some dreadful invitation that we can't refuse. It's an invitation that we've been longing for our entire lives, an invitation to the party of a lifetime.

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