

**Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
October 15, 2017**

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Dr. Peter R. Powell

Year A, Proper 24: Isaiah 25:1–9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:4–13; Matthew 22:1–14

A king has a son who is getting married, and he invites people to the banquet. He sends out his slaves, presumably on the day of the wedding, to remind them that they were invited, but no one comes. He sends out the slaves again to entice them to attend by sharing the menu with them. The food is already prepared, come and eat. No one comes. Not only do they not come, but they mistreat and kill the king's slaves. He responds by killing everyone who had been invited and destroying their city. Presumably their city is his city and refers to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. So, the king has wiped out what we can assume were the leading citizens of his kingdom and pulled his city down around him.

The king sends out different slaves (since the previous ones were murdered by those who refused to attend the wedding) and tells them to bring anyone in, whether good or bad, from the far reaches¹ of the Kingdom, so that there can be people at the wedding

¹ The word translated “crossroads” really means the “end of the road.”

banquet, presumably, if we get literal, being held in the midst of a ruined city.

The king observes those gathered by the slaves and one of them displeases him. We do not know what he did since everyone came off the street and no one had the proper garment. You may have heard that the king supplied everyone with the wedding garment, and this one fellow refused to wear it, but there is no support in the parable for this assertion. We have no idea why the king rejects him.

The parable concludes with the assertion that many are called and few are chosen.

Matthew chooses to tell this parable after the destruction of the temple. Judaism had lost its central place of worship and the only place where sacrifice was permitted. The Romans destroyed it. This parable has that in mind. One of the major questions for those who heard the gospel was, if Jesus is indeed the Messiah, then why was he rejected by his own people? The opening verses of this parable give us an allegorical answer. His own people were called first, and when they refused, the call was extended to Gentiles.

This works for Matthew but of course has nothing to do with our contemporary relation to Jews or Judaism. This is not God at his loving best, assuming of course that the king in this allegory is standing for God. What does it mean to worship a God who exercises this judgment?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer² wrote of “cheap grace.” This is a parable against cheap grace. We can speculate with some certainty that Matthew is talking to a group of Christians who felt smug and secure in their Christianity. They were not Jews and therefore didn’t fall away when the Temple fell. That made them feel superior. They believed that believing was all that was required. Matthew this morning says that calling yourself Christian is not enough. Even attending week after week, and pledging, is not enough. The series of parables we read beginning two weeks ago, the parable of the two sons, the parable of the unworthy tenants and the parable of the wedding feast emphasize that Christianity requires action. Even a fervent philosophical commitment to Christianity is insufficient. To be Christian we must do something.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, c. 1948).

I preached last week in Westport on a Christian response to Las Vegas, and I concluded that being armed is inconsistent with Christianity since Christianity is all about love and not fear. Being armed is about fear. The reaction was interesting. Most were glad that I said something about the critical issue of the week, but one accused me of preaching Democratic Policy and bad statistics and thereby abusing the pulpit. My reaction is that being Christian evokes a response from us and that being Christian means we have to have love affirming positions. Some however believe that being Christian means upholding good moral order and a clear definition of right and wrong. God, those I'm criticizing would say, demands order and rewards those who are committed to it. Matthew preaches to a church, or at least some in the church, who believe that believing is enough. This is cheap grace. Many modern Christians believe today that simply being Christian is enough. They regard baptism as fire insurance. They believe that God notices our good intentions and judges us by what we mentally assent to and not by how we lead our lives. Cheap grace says that God must accept me because I've accepted him.

Cheap grace ultimately robs our lives of any meaning. Matthew doesn't speculate on the behavior of the ejected wedding guest. We cannot know what the allegorical equivalent of the missing wedding garment was for Matthew. But we should rejoice in the judgment exercised by the king.

Why rejoice? While it is a popular hymn, at least in some circles, the nineteenth century hymn "Just as I am without one plea" misses the good news of judgment. In this morning's little parable the king is ultimately saying that what you and I do is important to our salvation.

Our lives gain meaning by how we respond to the challenge of leading a Christian life and caring for the things Jesus cared for. Those things include especially care for the poor, meaning that we do something for them, not that we wish there was no poverty. It's the actually doing something that's the challenge.

The issues Matthew faced are alive and well in our society. We may not feel them personally, but they are in the air around us. For Matthew being a Christian, even being a vocal and opinionated one, is not enough for salvation unless one cares about the issues that

God cares about. Many have gotten into the banquet hall but not all will sit down to the banquet. Thoughts and prayers are a response but never a sufficient one.

You and I have been invited to the marriage feast late in the day. We were not the first invited. Nevertheless it is a sincere invitation intended to give us the chance to amend our lives and live as God intended, caring for what God cares about. Ultimately it is about each of us, me especially, leading a life that keeps me in the hall because God has said that he will respect my decision to reject him and toss me out. In other words God cares for us so much that he listens to us even when what we think we want is to reject him.

Of course, by the grace of God, we can repent and be forgiven. There is no need to be cast out. We have a generous God; a forgiving God; a loving God but a God who ultimately respects us. This Gospel asks us to live carefully with God's respect for us.