

## **Lectionary 28 A 2017**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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Matthew 22:1-14

October 15, 2017

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

This king has a son, a prince, and it's the wedding day for the prince. And the people on the guest list do not come to the wedding. And so the king loses his temper, and he sends his servants out to round up strangers from the streets and bring them in to the banquet. The people who were invited declined the invitation. So the banquet is opened to the masses.

This, of course, is a parable of Jesus. A story told by Jesus to make a point. And it comes down to us in two versions. Luke's version, which is my favorite. And Matthew's version, which is today's gospel. I would very much enjoy preaching Luke's version, which is not assigned to the three-year cycle that we use. In Luke's version, the invited people make excuses. They are too busy. That seems like a timely message for our world. God is inviting us into something wonderful and great, but we're all too busy to accept the invitation. That'll preach.

I also like Luke because the king's men first go out into the city, and round up everyone they can find. And it's still not enough. A lot of meat has been slaughtered. This is supposed to be a big banquet. So in Luke's version of the parable, the king sends his men out a second time, this time into the countryside— to what the King James Version calls “the highways and hedges” and brings them in to the banquet.

Today's gospel— Matthew's presentation of the parable— is darker. The king's men are sent out, and the invited guests turn them down. And then the invited guests murder the king's men. And so the king sends an army and burns their city to the ground. None of that is in Luke. There is violence and murder in Matthew that we do not encounter in Luke. And then Matthew tells us about this man who isn't properly dressed for the occasion. And the king explodes again in anger. And that seems odd at best, and unfair at worst. I mean this man was practically kidnapped off the streets. How can you blame him for not putting on a coat and top hat? So unlike Luke's version of this parable— which I'd rather preach on— in this one there are descriptions of violence, and random force, and inexplicable justice in this parable.

This is characteristic of Matthew's gospel. And it's popped up on past Sundays, and will pop up again this fall, because we are in Matthew's gospel this year. The bad guys get wiped out, annihilated, or sent to hell. So for example, last week Jesus' parable ended this way:

*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.*

*The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.*

Today, we read:

*Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, the foolish young bridesmaids will say,

*"Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."*

A week later, before Thanksgiving,

*As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

The Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, Christ the King Sunday, ends the church year and ends our journey with Matthew. Including these words:

*"You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."*

The evangelist Matthew, the writer of the first gospel, presents these words on the lips of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells three parables like today's, in which someone or some group is cast into the "outer darkness" where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This doesn't occur anywhere else in the Bible. Only in Matthew. Furthermore, there are about six times in Matthew that Jesus speaks of being thrown into hellfire. Whereas that happens once or twice in Mark and Luke, and not at all in John.

And so whatever you make of it, whatever your opinion is, the facts are that the Jesus in Matthew's gospel says a lot more about judgment and condemnation and hell than any other gospel writer. In fact, more than any other New Testament writer [period], except the author of Revelation, Matthew emphasizes a day of judgment, with very harsh outcomes for the people who fail the test. And in all cases, Matthew presents these teachings and these words as the teachings and words of Jesus himself.

One of the perplexities faced by serious Christians is that the four gospels present Jesus in different ways. Jesus never wrote down his ideas and teachings for us. Jesus told this parable at some point, in his own language. And fifty years later, Matthew and Luke, writing in a different language, put this parable into their gospels. Luke put it early in his gospel, when Jesus was traveling and teaching in Galilee and was invited to a banquet. Matthew put it late in his gospel, with Jesus telling the parable in the temple in the days and hours before his arrest and crucifixion. By the time Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels that very temple had been destroyed. Perhaps that accounts for the dark and violent tone in today's reading [Matthew].

Like I said, Jesus never wrote stuff down for us in his own words. Everything we have about him is preserved at a distance in time and language and culture. A lot of people spend a lot of time trying to figure out what Jesus *really* said. Understandably. People want to say that the

problem is sort of like a banana. You can peel away the gospel writer, and throw it away as trash, and keep the edible part. The real Jesus is there, and the skin of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and/or John is easily dispensed with.

I guess for me the problem is not so easy. It seems to me more like a pumpkin. It's not very easy to peel, and even when I do manage to take it apart, it's hard for me to know which pieces are edible and which pieces should be thrown in the garbage.

What I can tell you with confidence is that Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher, and that our job is to keep to his teachings. And to not judge anyone else. No other New Testament writer besides Matthew contains the parable of the wheat and the weeds. The point of that parable is you can't tell the wheat from the weeds, and if you try to pull up one, you'll ruin everything. Take care of you, and let God judge the rest. No other New Testament writer besides Matthew contains the parable of the sheep and the goats. Both groups are surprised. Both groups ask Jesus, "When did we ever see you in need of help?" It's a brilliant parable that turns us away from judging, and turns us back to our neighbor, to the naked, to the sick, to the prisoners.

The architecture of Matthew's gospel assures us that judgment is God's, and God's alone. And there is a strong imperative that we quit trying to separate ourselves into saints and sinners and get on with the business of discipleship.

So the wrong lesson to derive from Matthew is that God is going to come and punish all the people that I think deserve punishment. Indeed, some of the most dangerous and violent people in the world today are convinced that they are holy and righteous in God's eyes, and will blow themselves up or fly airplanes into skyscrapers in order to destroy those who they see as unholy. It is the parable of the wheat and the weeds. The arrogance of human beings trying to carry out judgment day, and destroying both the good and the bad.

So as you hear these kinds of phrases this year— *"Throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* And *"Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* Keep in mind that the Jesus of Matthew's gospel intends for us to leave those things in God's hands. And concentrate on the work that IS in our hands. And according to the Jesus of Matthew's gospel, that's pretty important work. Amen.