

The Golden Calf

As a kid growing up in the Church, I had always imagined that the golden calf Aaron created for the Israelites while Moses was on the mountain with God was a gigantic thing. I think it was from seeing cartoon like paintings in Sunday School workbooks showing the people dancing around a statue on a pedestal the size of Lincoln inside the Lincoln Memorial. During the Covid 19 shut down I found an article in the New York Times about the golden calf. In the summer of 1991 archaeologists from Harvard University were doing excavations in the Holy Land and they found one while digging.

The legs, horns, tail, and other parts of the body were attached into the body with sockets. The people could pose the idol in various ways because of the way the parts were attached. I thought that was pretty interesting, that ancient people could come up with that sort of idea to make a golden statue movable. Based on the pottery found with it, it dates to about 1500 BC.

What really surprised me about it though, was the size. It wasn't a huge thing like I'd always assumed. The idol measured about 5 inches long, and stood about five inches tall, and weighed just under a pound. Can you imagine that? Something that fit in the palm of an adult hand was enough to stir the wrath of God to the point that He had to be talked out of wiping out the nation of Israel by Moses at Mount Sinai. Our God is a holy God. Only the love of Christ poured out at the cross for us turns His righteous anger from us. That's why it's so important for us to stay focused on Jesus. He's the Anchor of our faith!

This morning, on this Laity Sunday, we're going to look at another parable Jesus told while He was in Jerusalem at the temple between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 22:1-14. **Read Matthew 22:1-14.**

Banquet at the White House

Can you picture this story? Just imagine that you received a personal invitation to a banquet at the White House. The President of the United States is going to be there, and has personally invited you to attend. Not only that, but you will be picked up at your house in a shiny black limo, driven to Vandalia airport, where you will board Air Force One to fly directly to Washington, DC. You are going to be given the VIP treatment that only visiting leaders of other countries receive.

How would you respond? "You say that's next Saturday? Let's see. Well, I don't know, Joe, I was going to go out and work in my field that day. No, I better pass. I probably need to pick the corn that day." And imagine that the President was so concerned that you might not have the appropriate attire that he gave you a gift certificate for a tuxedo or formal gown. But you just don't even bother to go get the tux

or gown, and you show up at the White House in the ripped up blue jeans you love to wear when you're farming. Not likely, is it?

Well, those stories are similar to the parable that Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson today. This parable is just as unlikely. Jesus tells the story of a king's son who is getting married. The king decides to plan the event of a lifetime and sends invitations to all the high and important people to attend. But the invited guests come up with lame reasons and excuses to not even show up. They further mistreat the king by mistreating his messengers – they even kill some of them! The king is angry that his guests not only reject his invitation, but they mistreat and kill his messengers. So he calls up his troops and totally destroys all the invited guests, their towns and villages (verses 1-7, paraphrased).

But the king insists on having a party and that the banquet hall should be full. All this effort and expense is not to be wasted. So he sends his servants out into the streets and alleys, the bars and nightclubs, the restaurants and theaters. He sends them to the town square, to slums and homeless shelters, to Walmart and Kroger, and invites the young and old, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, to come and fill the banquet hall (verses 8-10 paraphrased).

Parable of Salvation History

All is going well, except now the king notices that one man has come to the party to enjoy the good food, but he refused to wear the wedding clothing. Some Bible scholars suggest that the king actually provided white robes for everyone attending to wear. Anyhow, this particular man chose not to dress up for the occasion (verses 11-12 paraphrased). So “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.’ For many are called, but few are chosen,” (verses 13-14).

God gives a gracious invitation here. There's more to this story than meets the eye. It's more than a king and a banquet. It's the story of the history of salvation, in which God sent prophets, and Jesus, and Christian evangelists with Good News, which some reject and others accept. There are a lot of parallels between this parable and the one about the wicked tenants that we looked at last week. In both parables, the owner or king provides something wonderful.

Last week, it was a vineyard. This week, it's a banquet. He then sends slaves to carry a message. In both, the people mistreat and kill the slaves. But the owner persists, sending other slaves, who the people also mistreat. He then punishes the people. The son is involved in both parables, but in different ways.

The way for us to understand the allegory for today's parable is this: the King is God. The son is Jesus. The invited guests are the Jewish people. The first slaves are the ancient prophets of Israel. The second and third sets of slaves are Christian missionaries. The burned city is Jerusalem. The “good and bad” consists of the mixed membership of the Church.

Stiff-Necked People

Let's spend a moment thinking about the rejected invitation. Why was it rejected? The parable says simply that the guests "would not come," (verse 3). They give no excuses, they just refuse to honor the invitation. Maybe they accepted the invitation a long time ago. It's easy to accept an invitation for a dinner to be held at some point in the distant future. Accepting the invitation didn't inconvenience them in any way – it's an honor to be invited to a banquet by the king. But it was a different story when it came time to drop what they were doing, to change their clothes, and go to the banquet.

Similarly, the call to follow Jesus is easy for us to accept in principle, isn't it? It's a no-brainer for us to choose Heaven over Hell. But we find it very inconvenient to accept the particulars about following Him. What about the call to serve on the Administrative Council, the SPRC, to work with kids, or to tithe? These are all things that take us out of our comfort zones.

Some have suggested that there were political reasons for refusing the invitation. The attendance of all the great men in the kingdom would be expected not only as a necessary expression of the loyalty they owed the king, but also as a sign of their loyalty to the successor to his throne. The religious establishment in Jerusalem, hearing this parable, knew very well that they were rebelling against God. Apparently this is exactly what they intended. Those who kill the king's slaves make their motives very clear. They want nothing to do with the king, or with anyone having anything to do with him. Seeing things this way, we're able to better understand the king's violent reaction in verse 7.

Angels of Apathy

Others have said the primary reason the invited didn't go was because they didn't want to go. It's not a situation where they can't come. They just don't want to. Period. Their "not wanting" to attend indicates that they don't view the invitation as an honor or privilege, even though it came from the king. This is followed by a second invitation. Even if they don't like the king, maybe they'll come because of all the good, free food. Again, their response shows a lack of respect. In verse 5, we're told, "They made light of it." Here's the response of apathy. They want to do what they want to do, when they want to do it.

Apathy is a major problem. On this Laity Sunday, we have the opportunity to reflect on all the great things that the laity in the Church, generally speaking, do. Down through the ages, it has always been the laity – not the clergy – passing the faith through the generations of their families. The Church – the laity – they do the hard work of being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ moving in the world. This is an area where the lay members of any local church shine, and yet – we have a hard time getting people to commit to serve.

The invited guests go about their ordinary affairs, "one to his farm, another to his business," (verse 6). Farming, businesses, jobs. These are all good things. They're blessings God has poured out on them, but these good things distracted the guests.

These aren't excuses, but personal concerns that they think are more important than the king's invitation to this once-in-a-lifetime celebration for his son. Temptation often comes clothed in wholesome attire. We have to work, run errands, take care of our kids, clean the house, cook, wash dishes and laundry, pay bills, mow the lawn, repair a furnace... Where can we find room on our "to-do" lists for God?

Excuses, Excuses

This parable isn't really all that far-fetched, after all. We see this play out every Sunday. The King of Kings, and Lord of Lords invites us each week to a party, a soul feast, a banquet, the marriage feast of His Son. But we offer excuses. "I was up late last night." "I don't want to miss the kick-off at noon." "It's a beautiful morning to go fishing." "The kids have a basketball game this morning." "The family is coming to lunch and I have to get the meal ready."

When we don't really want to do something, any excuse will do – no matter how flimsy or absurd. If we took the same excuses that people use for not coming to church, and applied them to other important areas of life, we'd realize just how ridiculous they really sound. As an example, let's think about our daily hygiene routine, particularly with showering.

Here are some excuses we might hear: "I don't like showers, because I was forced to take them as a child." "I shower on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter." "People who shower are hypocrites. They think they are cleaner than everyone else." "There are so many different kinds of soap; I can't decide which one is best." "I used to shower, but it got boring, so I stopped." "None of my friends shower." "I can't spare the time to take one." "People who make soap are only after your money." You get the idea!

Finally, we need to look at the man who came without the wedding garment. The wedding robe has nothing to do with the kind of clothing – fancy or plain – that we wear to church. It's clear that the way we understand this is the symbolism of the wedding robe. But Jesus doesn't explain exactly what the wedding robe represents. St. Augustine thought of it as charity. Martin Luther said it was faith. John Calvin thought it was good works. John Wesley called it grace.

Putting On Christ

Wearing the garments indicated the person's participation in the joy of the feast. Appearing in ordinary, dirty work clothes would show disrespect for the occasion. It showed a refusal to join in the king's rejoicing. This man is no more worthy than the ones who rejected the invitation. They refused to come, he shows contempt for the feast while actually attending it. In effect, he hasn't really accepted the invitation, since the invitation isn't just to be physically present at the feast, but to participate in the king's rejoicing over the marriage of his son.

In a few places in the New Testament, clothing is used as a metaphor for spiritual change. Paul says in Romans (13:14), to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Usually I mention one of Paul's statements

found in his first letter to the Church at Corinth, when we have Celebrations of Life, “This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality,” (15:53). Peter tells us, “And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble,’” (1 Pet. 5:5). Amen! He does!

Being clothed anew is a consistent New Testament expression for holiness and righteousness. The old clothes have come off us, friends, and the new ones are being put on! This Gospel lesson confronts us with the puzzle of God’s free invitation to the banquet with no strings attached, and His requirement of “putting on” something appropriate to the call He’s given us. Scottish theologian William Barclay once wrote, “The door is not open that the sinner may come and remain a sinner, but that the sinner may come and become a saint.” So may it be for us!

Prayer: God of Aaron, Miriam, and Moses, You stayed the hand of Your wrath when we fell into idolatry and discord; and when we forgot our deliverance, Your love for us remained unchanging. Transform us and our world into a place of justice, love, and peace. Welcome us to Your wedding feast where all are invited to be gathered in. Amen.