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Proper 23A, October 15, 2017

This is an ugly parable. There's really no other way to say it. Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like this - A King sends out an invitation to a banquet in honor of his son's wedding. Oddly, everyone turns it down. Now, why would you turn down an invitation to a big party thrown by the King? Free food, free booze. Then he sends out another invite, this time bragging about the gourmet meal that awaits. Who wouldn't come to this party? But again they refuse and then mock the party. Now, as parables go, so far this is getting weird. But, just wait, there's more! Now things go completely Game of Thrones. We watch in horror as the servants sent by the king to announce the party are abused, and murdered. Wow. We didn't see that coming! How did things go so wrong? And that's just the beginning of the violence. The king is so enraged by this, he retaliates by going to war against his own people, and before we know it, the disobedient guests are murdered, and the city lies in ruins.

But it gets weirder still. With all the violence and mayhem, is it possible the King still wants to party?!? Well, yes he does. And he sends out his remaining slaves to invite whoever hasn't been murdered to come to the party. Apparently, while soldiers pillaged and burned the offending citizenry, the sterno cans were kept burning under the delicacies and everything is just waiting for eager guests. Yeah, right. Would you go to this King's party.

But, wait, it gets even more bizarre. With the party in full swing, the king enters the great hall and starts mingling with the guests. All of a sudden, he finds that one of them is not appropriately attired. "Hey buddy," he says, "how did you get in here without a tux?" The poor guy is speechless. Where was he supposed to get a wedding robe at the last minute anyway, especially after the king's soldiers burned down the Men's Warehouse?!? But this great king is merciless. He has the poor guy tied up and thrown out, not just bounced from the party, but into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Wow. What a party! Maybe we begin to see why those first guests didn't want to come. With Kings like that, who needs enemies?!? Of course this was not meant to be a realistic story, but even as an allegory, it is very disturbing. And this is where biblical scholarship 101 comes in.

First, let's remember who this was written for. Matthew's Gospel was written by Jews and for Jews. It was written at the end of the first century, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the expulsion of the Jews from Palestine. At the end of the first century, Matthew's community was at odds with the synagogue down the street, and the parable we heard shed some light on that conflict. Remember this is not "Christians vs. Jews" -- but a conflict within Judaism, a family feud. And, is there anything uglier than family squabbles? Matthew's people understood themselves to be the faithful Jews who had responded to God's summons to the kingdom banquet offered in honor of God's Messiah, Jesus. And their cousins and neighbors had rejected the great invitation, ignoring and maybe even persecuting the bringers of this good news. Those hearing this story would have heard the burning of the city by the angry King as an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew was kind of like a first century televangelist declaring that the hurricanes are God's punishment for American sinfulness. And the improperly dressed guest - a warning against complacency. Just because you accepted the invitation, doesn't mean you're in. There has to be an outward sign that you've accepted Christ, baptism, which is the significance of the special garment.

This parable and the one from last week are extreme examples of Matthew's urgent call to his fellow Jews. We could forgive some of his exuberance, because followers of Jesus in that era truly believed the world was about to end. And they didn't want their neighbors and relatives left out of heaven.

However, through the centuries, Christians have twisted this Gospel and others like it, to vilify the Jews and other outsiders, and to find justification for persecuting them. Some of our most revered saints contributed to this -

St. John Chrysostom wrote a long series of sermons entitled - *Against the Jews*

St Augustine condemned the Jews in multiple writings as Christ-killers. St. Thomas Aquinas believed Jews should be enslaved not murdered. Popes and saints throughout the Middle Ages routinely whipped up hatred against our Jewish brethren, especially during the waves of plague, blaming them for the epidemics.

Martin Luther, who originally thought the Jews would flock to conversion once he had rid the church of Roman errors, eventually wrote a pamphlet, entitled "On the Jews and their Lies." You can imagine the impact that little tract had.

And of course it continues into the present day.

To be sure there have always been voices in the Church who have spoken up for the Jews - Eusebius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pope St. John XXIII. But, unfortunately there continues to be an insidious strain of anti-Semitism that's run throughout Christianity, as we've seen in this country over the past year.

And on a much broader scale, Gospel passages such as these have helped perpetuate the exclusivity that Jesus preached so loudly against. Justifying any number of false litmus tests to determine who's in and who's out.

Jesus' message was not about litmus tests, or any tests for that matter. I don't believe exclusivity and condemnation were Matthew's intention, nor the intention of any of the evangelists, not any of the first generations of followers of Jesus. In their most extreme writings they were trying to light a fire under their reluctant fellow Jews. They knew the God life was so important that it shouldn't be missed.

So, where is the good news in this for us?

Well, I think we find it in parallel passages in Luke and in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. These versions emphasize the openness of the feast after the first invitees don't come...and they don't include all the bloodshed and destruction. Yes, the King is annoyed, but his response is "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

Now this sounds more like Jesus describing God's Kingdom - a big inclusive party. This is the extravagant love of God shown to us in so many of Jesus' teachings and miracles.

But, what about all those cripples and poor people?!? Well, there's always a rub isn't there? God **does** invite us to a great party. And it's a great party that includes those we may not have wanted to include. I'm sure our deacon Jim is joyfully seating all sorts of outcasts in places of honor at the eternal banquet. **Haven't you ever been invited to a party and you've wanted to ask the host who else was invited? Come on, admit it. What if that obnoxious person who sings off key is there? Or the one who disagrees with me politically...and loudly?** But, it's not our party is it? God didn't consult us when he made the invitations. But there's great food, an open bar, and a great band. So, what if we don't like everybody. And, I guess that's a whole other sermon!