

Parableic Curveballs

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October 12, 2008

Matthew 22:1-14

For the last few weeks we've been in the midst of some awkward parables. First there were two sons; one agreed to work in the vineyard, but then didn't — the second said no, but did the work anyway. Then last week, in another vineyard, there were a bunch of scoundrel tenants who killed everyone the owner sent in to collect the produce — even the owner's son.

On to this week. It is a part of the same sequence — these three stories come one after another. They are presented as a unified response to questions from the religious authorities. The stories are increasingly hyperbolic and absurd. The first story is pretty reasonable. Children working or not working; saying one thing and doing another. Anyone can relate to that. The second gets a little stranger. A land owner sends servants and his own son to collect produce, and the tenant farmers kill them. That is an over-reaction if I've ever heard one. And now this third story. It includes some of the same dramatic elements — people who say one thing and do another, masters and servants, and rampant violence and murder.

This story steps completely outside the boundaries of reasonable narrative. Think about it. The entire story supposedly covered the time of a wedding banquet. During that period of time — a few hours perhaps? — one set of servants goes out and returns without guests. A second set goes out and they are all mistreated and murdered. A bit of an over-reaction to a dinner invite. The

king musters troops, kills the murderers and burns down their city — he essentially wages war. Not a proportional response. Then a third group goes out and brings in a rag-tag group of guests. All of this before the fatted calves got cold! And then, this capricious King tosses one of the guests for wearing the wrong clothes. And outside the palace there is weeping and gnashing of teeth — apparently because the guest really wanted to try that cold calf.

There is a lot of rhetorical stuff going on here — heavy hyperbole and allegory. These strange narrative elements and the capricious behavior of the characters involved should indicate that the point of the story is not the story itself. Looking at any one of these three stories out of context could lead us down innumerable rabbit holes, some of which wind up in very strange places. For example, if we look at this week's parable in an attempt to learn about God's character, we'll be in some trouble. From that lens we would have to assume that the King is God. This King is capricious and murderous. He uses servants to do his dirty work and seems to randomly condemn a guest for an apparently innocent mistake. Frankly, not a pleasant image of God. In fact, what I suspect that Jesus is doing is using his audience's preconceived notions about God and taking them to the extreme.

Who was the audience? If you go back to Matthew 21:23, the introduction to this set of three parables, you'll find that Jesus is speaking to a group of chief priests and elders. His intent in these three stories was to describe the Kingdom of heaven to them; so he used language and notions that they could understand.

Jesus was dismantling their understanding of God and their place in God's work, while simultaneously suggesting new paradigms for engaging in God's Kingdom.

Jesus starts with the first parable by placing "doing" ahead of "believing" or "saying" — he subverted paradigm of orthodoxy with orthopraxy. In the second parable, Jesus challenged the notion that the keepers of Israel's law — his audience here — were righteous tenants, preserving God's kingdom. The various servants sent to the tenants represent the prophets and John the Baptist, and culminate in Jesus himself, the son. It would be natural to assume that Jesus is condemning all of Israel in this parable, but the reaction of the audience makes it clear that Jesus is directing his critique at the keepers of the Law; the tenants. In 21:45 we see that "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized he was speaking about them, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet."

In the third parable as in the second, there is a person in power — this time a King — playing the role of God as understood by the religious authorities. There are servants — the people who carry out God's work. And this time there are banquet guests. The role of the servants continues the allegory from the previous parable. Christian tradition sees the first two sets of servants as the prophets sent to Israel. Note that they are sent to retrieve the "invited guests" — again, working within the understanding of the parable's audience. The religious leaders understood themselves to have pride of place within God's banquet.

With the third sending of servants, we enter the era of Jesus and of Christianity. The invitation to the banquet goes out to everyone that can hear;

anyone who is hungry. The message here is for the religious leaders — Jesus is letting them know that any sense of entitlement to God’s kingdom that they might have is misplaced. Instead, the servants fill the wedding hall with street rabble, “both good and bad.” Jesus even throws a little economic jab in a bit earlier in the parable — the second set of guests, instead of coming to the banquet, claimed they were too busy. They departed, “one to his farm, another to his business.” So the land owner and the executive don’t show up for the meal, but the street people and vagrants do.

Once the banquet hall is filled with people, there is a little add-on that doesn’t show up in Luke’s version of the parable. The king comes in to see the guests and notices one wearing the wrong clothes. The king orders him tossed from the banquet. This is a strange thing to do. When would guests have had time to change? They were brought in off the street. If they were all in street clothes, why was only one guest bounced? How could anyone have been prepared? And here again, if we read this parable trying to learn about God’s character, we wind up pretty ugly picture of God.

First of all, I would suggest again that Jesus isn’t trying to make a point about God. He is telling a parable where a major character is a king and so the king acts like, well, a king. He is capricious and violent and does whatever he pleases.

Second, why this talk about wedding robes? Again, the allegory is laid on thick here, and so a literal interpretation will fall short. Of course the guests couldn’t have run home and put on their Sunday best — in fact, considering they

are street people and vagrants, they might not have had any Sunday best to begin with. So what is the deeper meaning of the story? In the early church, after a baptism, a Christian convert would be given a new white robe. (Some churches still carry on that tradition.) The robe symbolized new life in Christ. The baptism was treated as a wedding to the church — entry into God’s banquet, if you will. Early readers of this story would have recognized that this was a guest who showed up for church, but wasn’t willing to be transformed by Christ.

Another important point here is who the actors are. Throughout the story, “servants” do the bidding of the king. The final set of servants sent out are the Church offering good news to the poor and dispossessed. The role of the servants is clear — they are not to make judgments as to the quality or preparedness of the potential guests. They are to bring in everyone and anyone that is willing to come. In the final bit of the parable, it is not the servants who determine that the poorly dressed guest is unsuitable. It is the king’s determination, and the king’s alone.

Though the parable is designed to tweak the religious leaders (and indeed, they go away cranky), there is a role for us in it as well. Jesus casts his followers as the servants — those who go out and bring people in to the banquet.

A couple weeks ago I shared a little of my consternation with the term “evangelical.” This parable has prompted me to revisit that consternation. The role of the servants in this parable is decidedly evangelical. They are bearers of good news — they usher people into God’s banquet. And what is the good news? The parable starts off as a description of “the kingdom of heaven.” So it’s

about where we go when we die, right? Some people to the banquet hall with the king, others to “the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Well, no. This isn't a parable about death at all. In fact, the various characters who die over the course of the story are just side notes. They don't wind up either in the banquet or in the outer darkness. The kingdom of heaven is for the guests who show up and take part; it is a here and now, participatory reality. The good news in this story isn't about what happens after death at all. It is about what happens when we decide to take part in God's feast here on earth. That is where earth and heaven intersect. The “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that Jesus describes borrows typical “hell” language, but here it is applied to someone who opted out of participating in God's banquet. If this is about a hell, it is about a hell-on-earth — the frustration of life outside of God's banquet. Our role as servants of Christ is to invite people into a new way of life. We offer an invitation not based on fear of eternal punishment, but grounded in the reality of God's life-giving activity here on earth. Our “good news” is that Christ is for everybody — the good, the bad, the ugly. The last and the least, sinners and saints. Immigrants and wanderers, uninsured and unemployed. The banquet hall doors are open to the world, and the world is becoming God's banquet hall.