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Matthew 22:1-14

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Earlier this week I was discussing the parable we just read from Matthew's gospel with a colleague of mine and she referred to it as "a hot mess." And that is a great way to describe this parable. It's a hot mess! With its atrocious violence, its harsh judgments, and its outrageous ending, is there any good news, any redeeming message whatsoever in this story?

I don't know if you recall or not, but the Gospel of Luke has a very similar story about a great banquet and I much prefer Luke's version. In Luke's version, nobody gets killed. In Luke's version, the invited guests claim they are too busy to come to the banquet and turn down the invitation. The host gets angry at their refusal to come, but unlike in Matthew's version, he doesn't burn down the entire city in a massive fit of revenge. Instead, in Luke's version, the host sends his servants out into the city streets to bring to the banquet the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Can't you see why I like Luke's version of the great banquet so much better? Luke gives us a story about the just reversal of social circumstances, where the least and forgotten are included in God's great banquet of love.

In contrast, Matthew's version of this story is a hot mess. In Matthew's account the invited guests not only refuse to come to the banquet, they abuse and kill the servants sent to invite them. When the king learns of this, he blows his lid, and in a massive tantrum, burns down the entire city! Talk about a fragile ego! And then when the king sends the servants to bring to the banquet the ordinary folks from right off the street, one of those new guests is harshly thrown out of the event for not wearing the appropriate wedding garment!

Not only is the story itself a mess but so too is the history behind this story and the judgments and divisions this story has fostered through the ages. Many scholars believe the gospel writer Matthew intended this parable to reflect the Jewish rejection of the Christian gospel and of its messengers who brought the invitation to the kingdom of God to the Jewish people. The king's vengeance in the story symbolizes the horrible destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in the year 70 C.E which some understood to be a sign of God's divine judgment. And those guests brought into the banquet from the streets were the Gentiles who end up enjoying the banquet after those invited refused to come.

Can you see how such anti-Semitic judgments and sentiments continue to make this story a truly hot mess? And we contribute to this mess if we buy into the idea that a God of love would behave like the king in this story toward those who do not accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is helpful to understand the context for Matthew's story, to understand the struggles the early Church had in sorting through its Jewish origins, and the rejection the early Jewish followers of Jesus experienced from their own Jewish community, and the surprising inclusion of Gentiles into the community of faith. All that helps us understand the context for Matthew's version of the story. But it still does not make this story any less offensive.

But before we toss this story into the trash can, there is a part of this parable that maybe deserves some of our careful consideration. I am referring to the disturbing part where the guest is thrown out of the banquet because he wasn't wearing the proper wedding robe. This seems especially unfair. How could a guest pulled right of the street be expected to be wearing the appropriate wedding garment?

In this part about the guest who gets kicked out, the parable shifts its focus. The focus shifts away from the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus and his followers, and now focuses its attention on the *Christian* readers and listeners of this story. The parable now poses a direct challenge to the smugness that insiders might feel about their status. In effect, the parable says to Christians, “You may have made it into the banquet but don’t get too smug about your status. Something is still expected of you.” Everyone gets burned by this parable!

With all of the exaggeration and hyperbole common to Jesus’ parables, the message of this parable is driven home: that accepting the invitation to the banquet, to the realm of Christ, to being a follower of Jesus, comes with expectations of us—great expectations. The wedding robe that the guest failed to wear symbolized the baptismal robe that was placed upon Christians after their baptism. That baptismal robe represented the new life in Christ—the metaphorical garment that the Christian would now dress themselves in each day of their life. Yes, the good and the bad may have been invited into the banquet, but their joining this event comes with expectations that they will wear the garments of the transformed life.

What we learn from this parable is that it isn’t enough simply to tick off the box labeled “Christian” on forms. It isn’t enough to call ourselves a Christian or even to attend worship regularly. Sometimes North American mainline Christians act as if simply being pleasant and friendly are the only requirements for being a Christian. We sometimes have low expectations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and often what expectations we do have do not include anything unpleasant, inconvenient, unpopular, or unsettling to our way of life. But this parable today disabuses us of any notion that following Jesus requires little from us. According to this parable there is the expectation that you and I will wear the garments of a transformed life and that we will be judged quite harshly when we fail to do so.

What is meant by the transformed life? One way of thinking about the transformed life is to ask ourselves whether anyone could discern anything different about us as a Christian than they could looking at the life of someone who was not a Christian. If we blend in with the values, norms, and practices of the rest of society, we are likely not living a transformed life.

To get a better understanding of the expectations Jesus has for his followers, all we have to do is review for a minute some of the astonishing things Jesus said and did and taught in the rest of Matthew's gospel. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. That's part of what the transformed life means. We hear Jesus offer grave warnings about wealth and he tells us not to store up treasures on earth. That's what being transformed looks like. Jesus teaches his followers not to judge others. In his parables Jesus taught about extreme forgiveness and radical grace toward others—yet other signs of the transformed life. In his ministry, he demonstrated acceptance of social outcasts and gave those who had failed or sinned second chances. He taught his followers to do to others as you would have others do to you. And Jesus even taught about transforming our hearts and minds, telling us that if we have anger in our hearts we have committed murder or if we have lust in our hearts we have committed adultery.

I don't know about you but I find these expectations of the Christian life quite daunting. They undermine any notion we might have that walking with Jesus is nothing more than a stroll through the park. Instead, walking faithfully with Jesus is going to be a pretty hefty hike! The good and the bad are indeed welcomed into the banquet but we are forewarned: there are expectations, great expectations, for how we shall dress ourselves.