

-Wow. And you thought the words of Jesus were strong last week! This parable, I believe, is one for the books. We were talking about the parable last week (the parable of the Vineyard Owner) at the Men's Breakfast and I kept saying to them: "You haven't seen anything yet."

-Strong and disturbing words and images from this text, if I say so myself. First you have this very strange account of a king giving a wedding banquet and then people refusing to come, so the king sends his army into literally flatten the city and kill everyone who rejected his party invitation. Then after he burns the city to the ground, he sends out another invitation to his "party". His servants gather up all the "good and bad" together to join in on the party. Then you have this incredibly bizarre exchange between the king and a wedding guest who didn't dress right, so he is thrown out. And this whole parable is finished and wrapped with a cutting "many are called but few are chosen" bow. Our text study group, who is usually very talkative after reading the scripture texts for the week sat in silence for about 30 seconds staring at our bibles following this reading. Infact, retired Pastor Greg Karlsgodt who is supply preaching today said: "I've been ordained for almost 50 years and I've never preached on this text....do I really want to now?"

-I think it's important for all of us to remember that even the most challenging stories like this one in scripture can have a nugget for all of us to take away. Sometimes you just have to dig a little bit (or a lot) more. So where on earth is this nugget for us this morning?

-Firstly, though this text is pretty bizarre and a challenging one to preach on, that doesn't mean it has not been preached on. It feeds perfectly into a narrative of "living in a perfectly right way because only the chosen have that perfect relationship with Jesus." So in my opinion, many sermons on this text have focused on this verse and used it almost as an abusive weapon leaving people wondering: "am I chosen? What if I am not?" Let me hold you in a little suspense for a second and let me get back to that verse a little later.

-I have one of my seminary professors at PLTS yelling in my ear right now the basic exegesis framework (or deep interpretation of a scripture text). The basic framework is developed in three questions: 1. What does the text literally say and not say? (meaning what is the literal sentence and language structure of Jesus' words) 2. What did this text say back in it's original context? 3. Taking questions 1 and 2, how can we translate what this text is saying to us in our own context?

-Let me take this one at a time. 1. What is this text literally saying? Let's keep in mind where this story is located in this gospel. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem (yes, Palm Sunday) a chapter before and he doesn't like what he sees. The first thing he does is go to the Temple and flips over the money changing tables saying famously: "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers." He then

addresses the Sadducees and the Temple elites in a long line of parables which we have been reading these past few weeks including this one. Let's just say it is clear that Jesus is not in a "let the children come" mood. He is angry by what he sees and this parable is clearly coming from a place of anger. This place of anger (and maybe frustration) toward the Temple leadership could also be fueling the (as one commentator has stated) the over-the-top language and story. Everything is to the extreme! How else can you explain a king burning down his whole city because many people didn't want to attend his party?

-So, for #2 "what did this text say to Matthew's community and context", let's also connect the question of why did Matthew's church need to hear such over the top language?

-Interestingly enough, this parable appears in another gospel, the Gospel of Luke. Except, clearly, Luke was a little uncomfortable with it because Luke's version stops at Matthew's verse 10: "Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests." Verses 11-14 (about the guy and wedding robe) are completely unique to Matthew. Why did Matthew feel like he had to add this addendum for his community?

-I feel it is linked to the overall political and religious situation of the time. The Roman army had come and wiped out the city of Jerusalem and the Temple itself (God's house). Because there was nothing left in Jerusalem, ancient Judaism was beginning to consolidate itself around the Torah, not the Temple anymore. Due to this consolidation, the followers of Jesus (also called the Nazarenes) were no longer welcome. They were no longer included in the Jewish tradition as they once were. Therefore, this parable's continued focus on invitation "the good and the bad" I think links to what Matthew's community was feeling.

-But what perhaps verses 11-14 are trying to convey is less of a comfort and more of a challenge to Matthew's church: "being a follower of Jesus does not mean just showing up and going through the motions maybe like many of the ancient Jewish elites of the Temple preached. Being a follower of Jesus means being prepared and putting the wedding robe on."

-This leaves me at #3: "what does this text, coming from Jesus' and Matthew's contexts, say to our own context?"

-Dr. Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, writes: "I wonder if the decline of mainline Protestantism is because we have been satisfied with just getting people in the pews and once we get them there, we are so happy they showed up that we have forgotten that accountability comes with discipleship."

-What does it mean for us to put the wedding robe on?

-I met an amazing young woman during my internship in San Francisco who worked for a non-profit that continues to find permanent housing for the homeless walking the

streets of the city. She and I got into this fascinating discussion once about worship. She said: "You know, I stopped attending church about 10 years ago. I realized this issue of homelessness is so big and so pressing, that I don't have time to sit in the pews anymore." Even though I disagree with her notion of what worship is, her statement has been ringing in my head this whole week in relation to this text. Choosing to follow Christ is more than just "sitting in the pews" every Sunday. In choosing to follow Christ, we must accept our calling to an active faith and put the wedding robe on.

-Our church is currently facing a \$5,000 budget shortfall at the moment and there is some anxiety happening. I can sense it, maybe you can too. I'm hearing things like: are we going to be OK? Do we have the capacity? Let me just say, the Spirit has been faithful to this church in the past and will be again. Though tough decisions might have to be made, we will get through it: the banquet is still open. But maybe this will become our challenge of putting the wedding robe on: of showing up prepared and ready for creativity and deep witness.

-To finish, I told you I would get back to that last verse that probably burned a hole in your ears at the end of the gospel reading. Remember? "Many are called, but few are chosen." Let me just offer this. If you look at the Greek understanding of "chosen" (*eklektos*), there is very little that separates the adjective ("chosen") and the verb ("to choose"). The two are almost interchangeable and this is on purpose because they are in relationship with each other. You are "chosen" by God to be given faith (which Jesus says again and again is all creation: ALL of us are beloved children). But, then oh chosen ones, you must choose to accept this gift of faith, to live by it. God continues to choose to give faith as a free promise and we choose to accept and live by faith. Knowing this, one can also translate this statement as: "Many are called, but few choose." What does it mean to choose a faith that is given to us by choice? One chooses to show up properly dressed to the wedding because they were chosen and invited to attend. May we be so bold as to put the wedding clothes on, to choose to live by faith, and show up ready to follow the Spirit. Amen.