

More Than Showing Up
May 4, 2014
Matthew 22:1-14

This morning's Scripture reading, from the twenty-second chapter of Matthew, describes a wedding banquet experience that differs dramatically from our own. We are used to joyous weddings followed by celebratory receptions. This biblical story – and it is clearly a story – is about a wedding banquet that almost didn't happen.

Listen for the voice of our Still Speaking God in this challenging story.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 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.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless.

Then 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."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy One, remind us that while each of us is on a journey of faith none of us journey alone. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I still remember the first sermon I ever preached. Actually, I remember the preparation far better than the actual message . . . Thankfully no parishioners were exposed to or harmed by my effort.

During the spring semester of my freshman year in college, I took an introductory course on preaching. The goal was to learn how to prepare a sermon, and how to deliver it.

When it came time to actually work on our own sermons the first task was to select a passage of Scripture to use as our text. The only requirements were that it could not be a passage someone else had selected and it could not be something the professor called a “hard passage.”

I will admit that I had never considered any part of the Bible hard – not until that moment. The professor knew that as beginning students we were not yet ready to handle some of the more challenging passages. To make life simpler and ensure we didn’t accidentally select a hard passage we could check to ensure a passage we were considering wasn’t included in books of hard sayings – books with titles that included *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*¹, *Hard Sayings of Jesus*² and *Hard Sayings of Paul*³.

This morning’s passage includes one of Jesus’ “hard sayings.” Most of us don’t typically think of Jesus as someone condemning people to a reality marked by “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

John Dominic Crossan calls this remark one of the “nastiest threats ever placed on the lips of Jesus.” Interestingly, he notes that it’s one Matthew seems to favor. In Matthew’s version of the gospel Jesus uses this phrase to conclude a parable a total of five times.⁴

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (IVP, 1988).

² F.F. Bruce. *Hard Sayings of Jesus* (IVP, 1983).

³ Manfred T. Brauch. *Hard Sayings of Paul* (IVP, 1989).

⁴ John Dominic Crossan. *The Power of Parables: How Fiction by Jesus became Fiction about Jesus* (HarperOne, 2012), p.190-191. The five parables are Parable of the Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43), Parable of the Net (13:47-50), Parable of the Great Dinner (22:1-14), Parable of the Servants (24:45-51), and Parable of the Master’s Money (25:14-30).

Since this hard saying comes at the end of the parable, I want to set it aside for now while we consider what the full parable means. And, to be honest, I need to offer a disclaimer: the entire parable counts as a hard passage – as one that is difficult to interpret.

Thankfully I didn't stop learning about preaching or about studying the Bible when I passed my first preaching course. As time has passed instead of intentionally staying away from passages like ours, I have found myself drawn to them.

So what is this morning's parable of the wedding banquet really all about? How would the original hearers have understood it? What does it mean for us today?

Any attempt to answer these questions must begin with the context. This is the third of three consecutive parables, and it is something of a grand finale for the set. The group of parables is addressed to the chief priests and elders.

The first parable is a parable of two sons. It offers a lesson about doing God's will rather than merely claiming to do so. The visual image that illustrates the story is a vineyard.⁵

In the second parable the vineyard takes center stage when those leasing the land show no respect for the owner. The tenants kill the owner's messengers one by one ending with the owner's own son.

And then we have our parable. Another parable that includes a violent streak. A parable of judgment. A parable that includes more killing.

Throughout the centuries, most theologians and ministers have opted to interpret our parable – the Parable of the Wedding Banquet – allegorically. Just reading through these three you will notice Matthew has already begun weaving an allegorical interpretation into the storyline.

It is relatively safe to suggest the normative allegorical interpretation: this is an account of salvation history. It begins with the prophets of

⁵ Matthew 21:28-32

Israel, continues with Christian missionaries, and will ultimately end with the last judgment.

Eugene Boring, now professor emeritus of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, explains it this way:

The original dinner party has become the messianic banquet given by the king (God) for his Son (Jesus) who invites guests who agree to come to the wedding celebration (salvation – the messianic banquet), but who then refuse the final invitations offered by both the first group of slaves (the Hebrew prophets) and the second (the prophetic Christian missionaries).⁶

Now that you have heard the explanation, I hope the parable makes more sense than it did when I first read it. Understanding what it means allegorically is not enough.

Recognizing this, Professor Boring suggests that the overall theological point of our parable is to remind us that while there are many ways you may find yourself drawn into the story of salvation history, continuing on as a follower of the way of Jesus requires more than simply showing up in response to the initial invitation.⁷

Just looking around the sanctuary I can see that you have the showing up part down pat. Showing up is good, but it is only the beginning.

This community of faith that we call The United Church is committed to nurturing people all along the journey of faith so that individually and together we can live into and up to our shared mission of celebrating God's presence and serving all people.

This morning, I want to suggest a few issues that I simply must address given their significance as they relate to our ability to serve all people. It is my firm belief we can only serve all people when all people are permitted to be people.

According to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice

⁶ M. Eugene Boring. *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. "Matthew." (Abingdon Press, 1995), p.417.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.419.

and peace in the world.”⁸ That statement is as true today as when the declaration was formally adopted back in 1948.

Here in the United States in 2014, we can all agree that there is no place for racism. Our intellectual assent, however, is not enough. It will never be enough in a country where an 80 year old business owner is the week’s main news story because of his racist remarks.⁹ It will never be enough as long as children in our community are treated unequally based on the color of their skin.

In a recent book about the reality of racism in our country today, Asian American Presbyterian Pastor Bruce Reyes-Chow writes

We must commit, as communities and as a country, to talking about race . . .¹⁰ I hope our culture will start to err on the side of talking too much rather than too little.¹¹

I truly believe, contrary to what the pundits and politicians would have us believe, that when thoughtful people gather together, we have the capacity to hold passionate, personal, transformative conversations, even about race.¹²

For our neighbors to be fully equal, we must be involved in striving to end racism in all of its many forms.

We must also commit to speaking up when the government denies anyone the opportunity to freely practice her or his religion of choice.

I probably don’t need to remind you that freedom of religion is a value held dear in our country and included in the First Amendment of our Constitution. You should also know it is cherished in the world at large, and included as the eighteenth article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹³

When our government begins to tell clergy what they can and cannot do, we should be alarmed. And, if alarm doesn’t cause us to do something, then we should expect that over time the government will

⁸ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available online at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

⁹ A clear reference to Donald Sterling who has been in the news this week first as reports of his racist remarks surface, and later as the NBA acted quickly and boldly issuing Sterling a \$2.5 million fine and a lifetime ban.

¹⁰ Bruce Reyes-Chow. *But I Don’t See You As Asian: Curating Conversations About Race* (2013), 273.

¹¹ Ibid, 853.

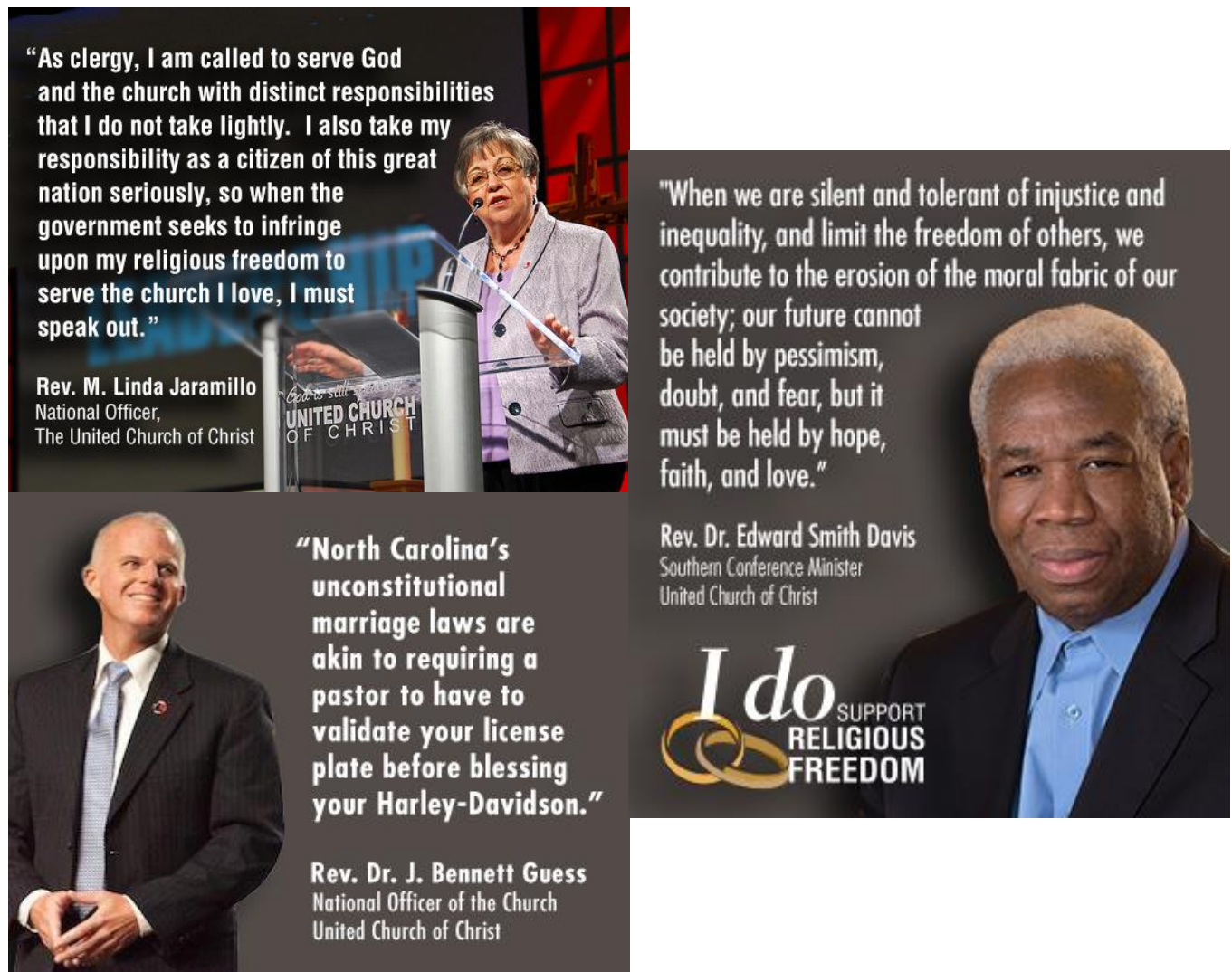
¹² Ibid. 283.

¹³ Universal Declaration.

increasingly restrict our previously constitutionally assured free exercise of religion.

During our time of prayer, I played a recording of remarks made on Monday by Geoffrey Black, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ.¹⁴ He offered those words on the day the UCC filed a landmark lawsuit in U.S. District Court arguing that North Carolina marriage laws restrict freedom of religion.¹⁵

Listen to some of the many remarks made by leaders in the UCC this week¹⁶:



¹⁴ A Message from the Rev. Geoffrey A. Black | The UCC Files Landmark Lawsuit in North Carolina <<http://youtu.be/G-1wQyX0Ha4>>

¹⁵ "I Do Support Religions Freedom." United Church of Christ. <<http://ucc.org/ido/>>

¹⁶ Images with remarks were all posted this week to "I DO support religious freedom" a community Facebook page of the United Church of Christ < <https://www.facebook.com/freereligionUCC>>

And over on Twitter the hashtag #freereligion includes contributions by many within and beyond the UCC. On Thursday the UCC used its own account to remind us of something we often take for granted:

You deserve the right to worship, to bless, to love, to believe and to pray without govt interference. And w/o penalty¹⁷

If you are serious about serving all people as a part of this community of faith and as a follower of the way of Jesus, then showing up will never be enough.

You must – I must – together we must get involved and make a difference.

- We must commit to work tirelessly to end all forms of racism and to secure religious freedom for all.
- We must pledge to do whatever is within our power to ensure all people have certain basic rights – inalienable rights – God-given rights.
- We must never lose sight of our common mission to serve all people.

Amen.

¹⁷ Tweeted by @unitedchurch on May 1, 2014, and retweeted by many including myself (@sowhatfaith).