

How Inclusive Is God?

Matthew 22:1-14

I don't like this parable of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel! When I saw it come up on the cycle of lectionary readings for today, my first inclination was to let it slide and choose something else. But nothing else seemed to present itself. I remembered that I have had some discussions recently with several folks recently about my belief that everybody gets saved. In my book *Finding Faith*, the chapter "Is Heaven Real," and I quote, "If there is a heaven, everyone goes." Not everyone agrees, including some of you all here, and that's okay with me. We don't need to agree on everything, but we need to hear and respect each other's understanding.

So the dawning realization came to me that this parable provided a good context for revisiting my thinking. It seems to indicate that heaven is limited only to those who say "yes" to the invitation. The question I ask myself is this: "What is it really saying to we who are trying so hard to include everyone?"

What was this parable saying originally? Well, it's complicated and takes place against the background of the eschatological fervor of Jesus' time. There is a parallel parable in Luke's gospel and, by placing the two side by side, scholars think that this parable is a combination of two different stories. The first is of an invitation to a feast that is spurned by those originally invited and finally attended by a curious mix of unexpected guests. The second parable was along the lines of the familiar story of the wise and foolish maidens, some with plenty of oil for their lamps and some who did not bring enough oil to keep their lamps lit. Given the complicated structure and sourcing of this parable, let's try to glean what it is telling us that we need to hear.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king giving a big wedding celebration for his son. This story was not intended to give the definitive description of God and God's realm. There were many parables that began, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...." This is meant to provide a slice of meaning.

The king invited local celebrities and royal friends to the feast, but they all refused. It was as though they resent the invitation and each snubbed king with some lame excuses. Some of them even abused and killed the special messengers. It was like an act of war and the king retaliated, as most kings would, by sending his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city. Maybe they were rival powers anyway.

The king then changed his guest list to whoever was available—rich or poor, couth or uncouth. The result was that the banquet hall was filled with an abundance of people. This is when the story takes a curious turn, perhaps where another story is grafted onto the first. As he walked through the crowd, the king came across one guest who wasn't dressed up for wedding. Maybe this guy wasn't really participating in the festivities. He was there, but it was almost like he didn't want to be there. So the king had him bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—one of the traditional descriptions of Hell.

So, that is the parable. What did it tell us? First of all, heaven is a bash, a party. And this is not the only time the Kingdom of Heaven was described this way. It was like a marriage feast, as celebratory a time as they could imagine in the first century. There was good news, eventually everyone gets invited. The bad news was that lots of people's invitations got cancelled rather violently. There was more good news—a great crowd of people at the party. And more bad news—one guy didn't get the memo about dress and he got tossed.

I don't know what to make of this phrase, "many are called, but few are chosen." It almost seems to indicate predestination of some sort or maybe like a lot of people coming to tryouts, but only a few make the team.

One thing seems very clear. It is important to respond to God's invitation to come to the party and it's important to dress for the occasion. It is important to come ready to enjoy the party and, in this case, clothes reflect attitude. I believe that many in church think that the party consists of joining their religious group. I don't know about you, but that does not seem like much of a party to me, not most of the time.

Maybe the Kingdom of Heaven is like an invitation to live life a certain way, with an attitude of love for self and others, with compassion for self and others, and maybe with hope and creativity. It's possible this parable is saying that just showing up isn't enough—that, in many ways, you have to dress to party! Or else you find yourself in a miserable state, like an outer darkness. You're in the party but the party's not in you

This is a parable and the way to find its meaning is by finding yourself in the story. Where do you see yourself? The only roles cast already are the king and probably his son. We were told that the king represented the Kingdom of God. He represented God in the context of a first-century understanding of kingship. Most of us readily see the son as Jesus and that may well have been the case in Matthew's Gospel, though it seems out of synch with how Jesus usually talked about himself. His Jewish audience might have seen the son as the whole nation of Israel. It may not refer to anyone or anything specifically, just an excuse for a king to throw a big party.

You might see yourself as one of the original invitees who chose not to attend the party. Perhaps you don't see the life of God as an invitation to which you have any desire to respond. Or maybe your life is full of excuses not to come to the banquet. Other things take precedence over finding that joy to which God invites us.

You might also find yourself among the ragtag guests invited late to the party, but glad to be there. Or perhaps you are the one who came to the party, but who did not celebrate—whose attitude does not reflect the deep joy of your surroundings. Who are you in this story? Where are you in this story? Where does this story live in you?

Where do I see myself in this story, in the Kingdom of God? There is a Passage that says, "Study to show thyself approved." (2 Timothy 2:15) Well I have mastered that one. I have worked and studied my whole life for approval from God, from my parents, from my family, my colleagues, and from the congregations I have served. I am addicted to approval and that is my challenge. I see myself among the crowd of invitees, but constantly looking for how I can please the one who invited me and the ones with whom I share the party. For much of my life, I have only come to know who I was when I found approval.

The search for approval is an insidious addiction that can lead us to develop remarkable powers of perception—the ability to read when others approve, or not quite. It always makes it difficult to be clear about who I am and what I really want. That is probably why I talk so much about the importance of deciding who you are and where you want to go in life. I struggle with it all the time and really believe it's a crucial part of our journey—worth all our efforts.

One of the significant pieces of self-awareness that has clarified for me over the years has been my belief that all of creation is one, that humanity is one, contrary to all the forces that try to divide us. When I say that God is radically inclusive, I mean that we are all one, each of us an expression of God's own self and, by definition, included in God's life—God's kingdom.

While I'd really like everyone to approve of that view, I would hold it even if everyone were against me. I don't see this parable teaching that God will destroy us or throw us away if we don't respond to the invitation, if we don't come to the party. I believe that the outer darkness is an experience of our own making and that God always waits for us with patience and love, always keeps extending the invitation to live fully. I believe that God's love in us and through us is constantly at work transforming darkness into light and fear into joy.

So, what do we do to move forward? On my drive to Mississippi last week, I listened to part of a book on CD called *Switch*. It reminded me about the best way to make healthy, helpful,

and lasting changes. It is not always a matter of understanding the problem, even the root issues, more clearly. It is also not a matter of developing complex and logically satisfying approaches to addressing those issues.

Quite often, the best way move forward and the best action to take is to figure out what are the bright spots. What works well for you in terms of the actions or mindsets that produce the results you want in your life? What you want your life to be? In what ways are you already doing what you want to being doing? Figure out what those are and do them more!

What do you do that helps you live the way you want to live? What helps you be the person you want to be, even a little bit? On a day to day basis, I find that I let the pace of my life be dictated to me by people and events outside myself. What happens is that the faster that pace, the more it controls how I feel and act. My pulse and heart beat faster. The choices I make reflect less what I want in my heart, what is right for me, and more my need to appease or get approval from others. How do I change that?

What changes my pace is prayer--quiet time, even a little. Some intentional breathing and maybe a repeated mantra helps me disengage from the fast track tends so quickly to worry, fear, and approval-seeking. Be still and know that God is. And quite often in that quiet time, in prayer that doesn't even have to involve asking God for anything, I become aware of an action that can help me move more into the direction I want to go. And with that slower inner tempo of my life, choosing to take that action begins to feel more like something I really want to do—something I can do for myself that will move me toward life and out of the valley of death.

God's invitation, even through so complex and confusing a parable as we have examined today, is to live—to choose what moves us toward life and joy. A sage once was asked his views on life after death. His response was that what matters more is life before death. God through Jesus invites us to experience life here and now. God through the people in your life invites you to experience life in all its fullness here and now. God through you invites the people in your life to experience the joy of heaven here and now. There is no other time. There is no other place.

Matthew 22:1-14

22Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.

⁴Again 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.’

⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business,

⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’

¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,

¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless.

¹³Then 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.’

¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”