

I'm going to start this morning by saying something that to some of you might seem to be verging on heresy—and to others of you may seem so self-evident that it's hardly even worth mentioning. Ready? Here we go:

I don't think the parable that Matthew describes Jesus telling in the Gospel today bears any very close resemblance to the parable that Jesus actually would have told. I think Matthew has taken a parable of Jesus handed down in the tradition and Matthew has changed it, added to it, gussied it up, so that it addresses a situation in *Matthew's* community and makes a point for *Matthew's* agenda. And if we today want to know what this Gospel is about, we have to be willing to “get behind” Matthew's changes, and take a good guess at what Jesus originally said, and ask why Matthew has changed it in the way he has.

For some Christians, the idea that we can look at the text of Scripture and start making judgments about what is “really” true or what Jesus “really” said seems very inappropriate. Scripture is Scripture, and the words of the text stand in judgment over us, we don't have any business judging them. On the other hand, for other Christians, interpreting the text of Scripture with historical knowledge and critical judgment seems to be a very appropriate and very faithful thing to do, using the intellectual gifts that God has given us to try to understand the full meaning of God's Word in ways that aren't limited to a time and a place hundreds of years ago and hundreds of miles away. This parable in the Gospel today seems to me to be a prime example of how we can actually come to understand God's message *better* if we're willing to take the text and pull it apart a little bit.

There are versions of the parable of the banquet in the Gospel of Luke and in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, so we can get some idea of what an earlier state of the parable might have been. I think the parable as Jesus originally told it ran something like this: A rich man gave a big dinner party for his closest friends. When the party was ready, the rich man sent his servants to invite everyone to come. But all the friends said they had other things to do: they had business to attend to, or other parties to go to, or their own agendas that they thought were more important. So none of the invited guests came. Well, the rich man didn't want his party to go to waste, so he sent his servants out to invite *other* guests, not his closest friends, but anyone they could find, anyone at all. So the banquet hall was filled with the poor, the lame, the sick, all sorts of conditions of people. And *that* party ended up being a huge success. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

If that is something like the parable that Jesus originally told, then I think Jesus meant by it something like this: God is inviting the faithful people into the kingdom, into the fulfillment of God's will for justice and peace. But God's invited guests, the chief priests and scribes and Pharisees, those people who supposedly know God's will the best and care for God's call the most, those guests don't want to come. They refused the call to righteousness of John the Baptist before, and they're refusing the community of peace with Jesus now. So if they won't accept the invitation, Jesus says, then God will invite someone else, not the priests and Pharisees, but the outcasts, the marginalized, the sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors, the last people you would expect to find at God's banquet—and yet there they are, literally having the time of their lives. So, Jesus says, if you want to enjoy the feast of God's blessing, drop what you're doing and come when God invites you.

Jesus told his parable to the priests and the elders, the Jewish religious leaders. By the time Matthew got hold of the parable, forty or fifty years later, the situation had changed. Matthew wasn't speaking to Jewish leaders, but to the church, and specifically to a church that had been kicked out of the synagogue. By Matthew's time the split between Jews and Christians had become a fact, and Matthew's community was trying to figure out who they were. They'd been Jews, and then they'd been Jews who believed in Jesus, Jewish-Christians as historians call them—and now they were being told they weren't Jews anymore, now they were being told that their belief in Jesus had separated them from the covenant people. It was a real crisis of faith for Matthew's community. So Matthew's Gospel is full of teachings that the real people of the covenant, the real inheritor of the promises of God, is the Church, and not the Jewish synagogue at all. Nowadays, of course, we look at that situation and we want to be very careful not to use it as a pretext for anti-Semitism or an excuse for anti-Jewish feeling in the

Christian community. But in Matthew's time, for Matthew's community, it was important to say that the *Church* was the faithful people, and nobody could tell them otherwise.

So Matthew took Jesus' parable and made some changes to it. In Matthew's version, the banquet is given by a king, not just a rich man, and it's the wedding banquet for his son, not just a regular dinner party—and the king, the son, and the wedding are all specifically Christian symbols for God, Jesus, and the coming of the kingdom. In Matthew's version, the invited guests don't just turn down the invitation, they mistreat and kill the messengers—just as the prophets had been mistreated and killed in generations before. In Matthew's version, the king is so angered by their refusal that he sends an army to kill the guests and burn down their city—and that's what happened to the city of Jerusalem in the year 70: Roman armies came and besieged the city and conquered it and burned it to the ground, and many people at that time saw God's judgment in that destruction. What Matthew has done is taken the parable and made it into an allegory of how the covenant has passed from a rebellious people to a new people, how there is a new set of guests for God's banquet, a new faithful people in the Church. Matthew has used a parable of Jesus, interpreted and amplified with Matthew's own terms, to speak about God's covenant and God's call as Matthew's people needed to hear it, in the time and the place where Matthew lived.

For Jesus the parable was about the religious power elite turning away from God, and the poor and outcast being welcomed in their place. For Matthew the parable was about a new covenant people being unexpectedly invited into the kingdom of God. For both of them, the basic message of the parable is this: "When God invites you, don't refuse—when God invites you, say *Yes*."

And that message is still very relevant and still very timely for us today. As the parable spoke one way in Jesus' context, as the parable spoke another way in Matthew's context, so the parable speaks in our context, calling us to recognize God's invitation and respond to it, calling us to take our place in the working-out of God's reign of justice and peace, calling us not to refuse the opportunity to do justice and peace when it is opened up before us.

The opportunity to do justice and peace is opened to us in our support of the Millennium Development Goals, especially today, on this MDG Sunday, as we focus special attention on supporting the work of Bread for the World. You know, it's been calculated that if governments and corporate foundations and dioceses and parishes and individuals all gave point-seven-percent—seven tenths of one percent—of our income to the MDGs, then we could eradicate extreme poverty in a matter of years. Point-seven-percent isn't all that much; and if we have the opportunity to do justice and peace by giving just that much, that's an invitation that's hard to refuse.

The opportunity to do justice and peace is opened to us in the way we respond to the growing global financial crisis. More and more these days I see news about financial anxiety, stocks dropping because people are selling in a panic, people worried about whether their savings will be safe in the bank. The anxiety is understandable. But anxiety can also lead to a kind of self-centeredness, to a fearful way of putting one's own needs first and letting others just fend for themselves. Jesus in his parable shows us a very different way of responding, a way in which everyone, including the poor and the dispossessed—*especially* the poor and the dispossessed—everyone is given their share in the banquet. God invites us likewise to put aside our anxieties and to take our part in the banquet, to take our part in making sure others are at the banquet, to take our part in making sure that real people's real needs aren't getting lost in the financial shuffle—and that is an invitation that's hard to refuse.

The opportunity to do justice and peace is opened to us right here in this Eucharist, as we exchange the Peace with one another and are nourished in right relationships in the sharing of Communion. The justice and peace we model here in this liturgy, we are meant to take out and make real in our society. We are invited to be part of Christ's Body, transforming the world—and that is an invitation that's hard to refuse.

The Gospel parable today—whether in Jesus' original version or in Matthew's expanded version—the Gospel today says to us "When God invites you, don't refuse—when God invites you, say *Yes*." Let us say "Yes" to God today, and let us live that "Yes" every day. Amen.