

World Communion Sunday 2020
Matthew 22:1-14
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon A White
October 11, 2020

This is a tough passage. There's no getting around it. It is full of judgement and slinging of violence. It certainly doesn't portray the people well or an image of God who loves and cares for all... but that's if we look just at the surface of the story.

As we know from all of our study of both biblical and nonbiblical history... context is the key if we are to understand the meaning of texts.

A first read might imply these things: Those who were originally invited to the banquet refused the invitation from the king to a wedding feast. Who would do that? The invitees ignored the generous invitation, of what was sure to be the party of the century, and went about their business. The king, we read, was outraged... almost implying a wounded ego which went out of control from hurt pride. How dare they refuse my invitation, he might have thought... In an effort not to be shown up and disgraced by empty seats, the guest list was changed. The average Joe and Jane were now included from the throngs of commoners on the streets. However, when the delighted guests showed up, they weren't wearing the right clothes... and that, too, enraged the king. And they were thrown out.

It certainly doesn't inspire anyone to want to accept the generous invitation from the king... even if we don't follow Matthew's implied analogy of the king being God.

In this passage, some preachers and expositors of the scriptures over time have mistakenly pointed to this passage as a basis to promote

antisemitism, taking the original guests to symbolize Jewish leaders of the day, who were later thrown out and condemned for refusing the King. Many scholars refute that assessment and say, rather, in this parable, we are catching a glimpse of the low point in an intense family feud. I want to emphasize the word “family” here because Matthew and his community are caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah and, in particular, whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah Israel’s prophets had promised. This is not a Jewish-Christian dispute – but it rather represents the pain of a community sundered from its family and trying to justify itself. It has nothing to do with God accepting and rejecting one group over another.

We must always be careful and challenge any reading in the Christian scriptures which may prompt an anti-Semitic response. Others might read this and identify with one group or another, separating themselves from those who think ideologically or politically different than they do.

The question this text poses for us is what do we do when people we love don’t believe as we do? If we don’t agree with Matthew’s way of resolving these difficult matters and feelings, then what response do we make?

In these days of deep division in our country, the choices are to either condemn those who believe differently or feel like we are somehow lacking in integrity by not condemning them. But keep in mind, we are not Matthew’s community.

The message for us, as we look at our relationship to God and how God is relevant in our world right here and right now, is the good news as shown throughout the totality of scripture that God invites all, those perceived by us as good AND bad (Mt. 22:10), because God is a God of expansive love and radical inclusiveness. And we are disciples who see,

especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, not only just how far God will go to make this invitation of grace but also that God's words of love and forgiveness are more powerful than any words of punishment, hate, or fear.

And because we have seen and heard and experienced first-hand God's love, we do not have to call down God's judgment on others but can trust the God we know in Jesus to care for those who do not respond to God's invitation just as graciously as God has cared for us. We can, to borrow the words Paul writes to the church at Philippi, "not worry about anything – including when our loved ones don't believe as we do – but "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [our] requests be made known to God," trusting that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus."

If we can practice trusting God enough to resist condemnation but instead pray for our loved ones, we might find ourselves more capable of sharing why what we believe is important to us (rather than just insisting that believing is what matters). We might respect the questions, beliefs, and struggles of those we love. And we might offer our care and support, following Jesus' example, rather than condemn others, offering peace rather than retribution. And that may just be the most powerful witness we can offer.

When we think about divisive periods of world history, Apartheid may come to mind. This story tells of an instance where people of faith were able to overcome major obstacles, leading to an earth-shaking result.

"Asked by the BBC to identify the defining moment in his life, Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke of the day he and his mother were walking down the street. Tutu was nine years old. A tall white man dressed in a black suit came towards them. In the days of apartheid in South Africa, when

a black person and a white person met while walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass and nod their head as a gesture of respect. But this day, before the young Tutu and his mother could step off the sidewalk the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as they passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!

The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. It changed Tutu's life. When his mother told him that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a "man of God," Tutu found his calling. "When she told me that he was an Anglican priest, I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God," said Tutu.

Huddleston later became a mentor to Desmond Tutu and his commitment to the equality of all human beings due to their creation in God's image, a key driver in Tutu's opposition to apartheid.

What if we looked at this text from the viewpoint of the radical act of generosity and forbearance to which we are called?

We are a diverse body of people in the church around the world... even in our church. Shaped by our Reformed theology, our common heritage unites us, even in spite of what differences may divide us as a people of faith. Reformed means changed. We are changed and always changing. As with other periods of transition in our church, our history has helped to both inform and inspire us. But it also continues to challenge us to listen and discover what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do in a new time.

On this Sunday when we celebrate the unity of Christians from around the world... who believe similarly and differently than we do... let us

come together, united in our love of God and knowledge that all are made in the image of our creator.

Amen!