

**Year A, Pentecost 17, Proper 23**  
**October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011**  
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**Matthew 22:1-14**

### The Authority of the Lowest Place

How many of you have given a wedding reception for a son or daughter or had one at your own marriage? Did you send out invitations with an RSVP? In Jesus' story no one wants to come to the wedding banquet in honor of the king's son!

Maybe they don't like the menu. The king sweetens the pot by describing the banquet in more alluring detail. The smell of roast beef and hot veal makes my mouth water but it doesn't have that effect on them. They dismiss his offer and even make fun of it. They turn their backs and walk away. One goes to his farm, another to his business, and the rest of them seize his slaves, rough them up and kill them. What kind of RSVP is that?

We know Jesus tells the story in response to the question the temple leaders ask when Jesus causes the problem in the temple. Their question: "What gives you the right to cause the trouble in the temple and who do you think gave you that right?" Let's allow Jesus to continue his story.

When the first people refused to come to his party, the king was enraged. He sent his troops and wiped them all out. He killed them all just like in the Old Testament. He burned their city to the ground, erasing any trace of them. For him, they no longer existed. Up until now I thought the king represented God but now I am not so sure. If this king represents God than I have been very wrong in everything I have thought, taught and preached these last few years.

I do know that when someone slights me like they slighted him, it makes me mad. When someone disregards me, scorns me or hurts that which represents me, especially when I reach out in love, service and friendship to them, it makes me want to write them out of existence. I want to say "You are no longer my friend; for me, you no longer exist." This happens all the time in families, communities and among nations. But I had

thought and hoped that God was different from me on that. I want God to set a higher standard.

In his anger the king declares all those he has invited unworthy of being at the banquet and instructs his slaves to go into the main streets; not the exclusive parts of town, but the main streets inhabited by everyone alike, and invite everyone they find to the wedding banquet. My opinion again shifts and I decide maybe I do like this king. His anger is a little excessive but I like his inclusive values. If the king in Jesus' story is a human, he is a complex man whose behavior is a little erratic. If the king represents God than God is both very vindictive and yet includes all, both the good and the bad. How do we make sense of that?

Jesus continues his story. "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." Shocking! I would like the story to be over at this point. This would fit with my belief in God's radical inclusivity but to make that work I would have to ignore the king's bad behavior in wiping out all those ungrateful wretches who refused to come to the banquet. And, to boot, the story doesn't end here! Jesus adds another part. Apparently this new kingdom that Jesus brings is not a revolution where the folks at the top get switched out and the folks at the bottom plugged in, making them the new folks at the top. Something more is going on.

In this next part, the scene shifts to the banquet and the king, who upon entering the banquet hall notices a man not wearing a wedding robe. Wedding robes were issued to all guests who came to banquets and they covered people's street clothes. You remember the Spiritual—"I've got a robe, you've got a robe, all God's children got robes?" The king addresses the robe-less stranger by saying, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And then the surprise. The text reads, "And he was speechless." The robe-less man was speechless and this speechlessness seems to be the problem that leads to what happens next.

He makes no response. He is mute. He does not give an accounting for why he is there! He "never says a mumbling word." Does this remind you of anyone?

“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.’” Can you think of a more frightening prospect—to be bound hand and foot and thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? The scene exceeds the horror of the worst Halloween movie. Why did Jesus add this to his story?

With the king’s frightening behavior, my faith in him has again fallen off the cliff. Do I like this king or not. My feelings keep shifting. If this king represents God this is not a god I want any part of. And then Jesus tops the story off with, “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

At this point I confess to being a quivering mass of uncertainty. In notes to myself on this text I wrote, “Don’t be too sure that you are in—being too sure is not good for your ego. It can puff you up and make you proud. Inflated egos don’t make it into the kingdom of heaven. In fact, with our inflated egos we throw ourselves out.”

**But what if the man without the robe is Jesus? What if he is the one who stands mute, is seized, bound hand and foot and thrown out into the outer darkness?**

Does it not say that he descended into Hell for our sake? Did not John the Baptist say, “Behold the man who takes away the sin of the world?” If all the not worthy, both the good and the bad, were invited and assembled at the banquet, why does not having a robe make any difference? Why did the king react with such rage toward the one who stood out as different from the rest? Is Jesus talking about himself here?

**What if we are the king and the king is us?** We are the ones who become enraged and destroy whole villages, we are the ones who declare our brothers and sisters not worthy of inclusion in our family, we are the ones who throw each other into the outer darkness, bound hand and feet, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. The hell into which Jesus is thrown is the hell of our own making. **Jesus stands mute because he knows we will never see who we are until we see what we have done to him and then experience his forgiveness.** He could have spoken up and explained it all, but we would never have believed him. He had to allow himself to be drug through our hell. As Paul said, “Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with

God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Jesus did stand out from all the others and the powers of this world immediately saw him and questioned his presence. He was the one without the robe, stripped of it, the one chosen to be **the slain Lamb of God**. He knew that crashing the party would lead to his expulsion but he did it anyway. He was the one bound hand and foot and cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the irony here is that it was those who loved him who were weeping and the majority who did not, who were gnashing their teeth. Or you can take this another way. In being cast out, Jesus is sent to the place of suffering, the place we all know some of the time. Now, when we are there, we know we are not alone.

But it did not end there. After his death there comes the resurrection, and the resurrection is profoundly hopeful. And now for the point toward which we have been driving this whole time! The robe-less man in Jesus' story is Jesus himself, the suffering servant. It is Jesus who receives his authority by taking onto himself the violence, the sins, and the suffering of others. Jesus allows himself to take the lowest place, the place of the scapegoat; the one cast out, the one despised by all, and occupy it as God's son. Can you believe it! **The one cast out is God's Son! The place of being cast out is no longer a lonely place, for Jesus is there.** It has been invaded by him. This is the place from which his authority comes and the answer to the religious leader's question. **His authority comes from his willingness to occupy the lowest place—the place all others avoid at any cost.**

Jesus' willingness to be the one-out redeemed that place so that now we know nothing can separate us from the love of God. **We don't need to be afraid of the lowest place, for it is the place where we find Jesus. He occupies that place, redeems it and transforms it for ever.** He removes its sting and sets us free to live without fear of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.