Sermon for Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A), October 15, 2017

Matthew 22:1-14

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In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our sermon text for this morning is from Matthew 22: “The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.” Thus far the text.

Two questions confront us today: one from the gospel reading and one from the newspaper. The first is this: “Why are some people saved, but not others?” Or, to put it in other words, “Why do some people feast on the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, but others go to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth?” The second question is related to this: “Why does God let bad things happen? If God *desires* good things for us, and if he is perfectly *capable* of giving us these good things, then why does not always do so?”

These two questions are ones which come up from time to time in everyone’s life. When your son or daughter wanders away from the faith, when your dying grandfather sends you out of the room whenever you mention Jesus, when you get the dreadful diagnosis of cancer, or when all you seem to hear about anymore is hurricanes, forest fires, and mass shootings, you begin to wonder: what is God thinking? Doesn’t he see what’s going on? Why isn’t he doing something to fix this? How long will he watch us suffer?

Our gospel reading gives us some insight into the answer. Jesus’ words begin to tell us how he feels about our suffering.

## Why are some saved but not others?

Jesus portrays the problem like this: a king prepares a great wedding feast, and he invites all the right people to join in on the celebration. But the people whom you’d expect to jump at the chance, well they just make excuses and stay home. He sends another invitation by way of more of his servants. Now they don’t just refuse to come; they actually beat and kill the messengers. In a furious rage, the king destroys not only those murderers but the entire city as well—this is foreshadowing how God will destroy Jerusalem and scatter his people some 40 years after they kill his Son.

Why didn’t these people make it into the heavenly banquet? The invitation was valid. The feast was prepared. The king *thought* these people to be worthy, and he even sent multiple messengers to invite them. Why, then, were these initial guests not at the feast? Because they *rejected* the invitation. Because they had better things to do—or so they foolishly thought. The king offered them this gracious invitation, but they were offended by it.

How could this happen? How could they not see clearly? Why didn’t they understand what they were being offered? Well, we don’t know. It actually makes no sense at all.

In my Confirmation class I’ve been writing on the board a list of rules for rightly interpreting Scripture. The second rule is a classic: “It’s all about Jesus”—in the New Testament and the Old Testament alike. The first rule, however, catches many people off guard. The first rule is this: “’I don’t know’ is often the best answer.” “I don’t know” is typically a more faithful answer than just making something up. Scripture doesn’t tell us what was going through these people’s minds. It doesn’t reveal their motivations or exactly what they thought of the king. Scripture doesn’t tell us, and so we can’t say for sure. Why did they refuse the king, when it makes no sense to do so? We don’t know. Why do some people reject the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus? We don’t know. Why do some people come to the celebration but try to do so on their own terms—to their peril? We don’t know. But it happens. And it’s bad.

But God does not cancel the celebration just because some people refuse to come. He did not destroy *all people* in the Flood, but he saved Noah and his family. He did not abandon *all* his people when he sent them into exile, but he brought a remnant back to the land of Israel. When *these* guests reject the king’s invitation, he opens it up to anyone and everyone: princes and beggars, merchants and priests, children, drunkards, and thieves. Everyone is invited, both good and bad. The banquet *will* go on. His wedding hall *will* be filled.

And so it is with the invitation of the Gospel: this Good News goes out to everyone, no matter their age, skin color, or vices—no matter how they’ve lived their life, or what mistakes they’ve made, or what terrible people they are. “Come to the wedding feast! Come to the celebration! I have prepared a place for *you* in my kingdom! Congratulations. Welcome. Have a seat. Grab a drink. Enjoy yourself.”

Dear friends in Christ, *you* have two roles in this parable. You are *not* the king. You are *not* the first guests invited, for here you actually sit, ready and eager for the foretaste of the feast to come in the Lord’s Supper.

Who are you, then? You are the servants. You are the messengers of the Lord who have been sent out to invite all people to the feast in God’s kingdom. You bear the Good News of free salvation. You announce that Jesus is the Lord and everyone is welcome to join him in eternal life. But although you come *in peace* with a *good message*, some people will more or less kill you for it. Not everyone wants to receive God’s gifts on God’s terms, especially if that means they have to acknowledge their sin and their need for the Savior. Your job is not to worry about that, but to *go* and to bear the message well.

But as your *other* role in the parable, you are those who have been invited and have *come* to the feast. You are on the guest list. Jesus has prepared a place for you, and here you sit. You are dressed appropriately, for you are clothed in Christ’s righteousness. In a few minutes, you will celebrate at the feast of the Son of the King and his bride the Church, whom he presents to himself without spot or blemish or any such thing. You will be united to Christ as one flesh, and what God joins together no one will separate. And the celebration will be unending.

Who would turn this down? Who would say, “Eh, no thanks; I have other things to attend to”? Why are some people repulsed by this gracious invitation? We don’t know. Certainly this has been the case ever since the Fall. But the invitation remains valid, the celebration is good, and here *you* sit. Congratulations, and welcome.

## Why does God let bad things happen?

With the question of “Why some are saved but not others” answered-*but-not-answered*, we turn to the next: “Why does God let bad things happen?” Again, we must start by stating a few things that we *do* know.

God *is* good, and he desires good things for us. We see this all the time when we look at how he actually *does* provide us with good gifts: clothing and shoes; food and drink; house and home; wife and children; land, animals and all the rest—everything we need to support this body and life.

God *is* all-powerful. We can look at the stories in Scripture—from the Flood to the resurrection. Or we can look at the vast and diverse creation around us. “Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

God is not stingy or biased with his gifts. “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). He feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field. How much more will he feed and clothe us? (Matthew 6:25-34)

So if God *desires* to give us good things, and he is *capable* of giving us good things, and if he *takes pleasure* in giving us good things, then why on earth does he keep letting such terrible things happen? Why hasn’t he put an end to hurricanes, and wildfires, and violence, and disease? I mean, Jesus calmed the storms, healed the sick, and cast out demons; why doesn’t he do the same for us now? Doesn’t he know? Doesn’t he care?

## God suffers with and for us

The God who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them—he has *not* abandoned us. His face is *not* turned away, his love has *not* died down, and his power has *not* been constrained.

The God who created all things has *joined* his creation. He knows what it is to be human and to suffer in this world. He has done it. He has taken hatred, and violence, and bloodshed head-on. He knows. He sees. He cares. He suffers *with* us. And he is doing something about it.

God suffered *for* us—the righteous for the unrighteous. He took on our human flesh and suffered and died in the flesh. By doing so, he has put an end to suffering and death. Since Christ has defeated death, it can never conquer him again. Since Christ has risen from the dead, so, too, shall *we* rise.

God will *put* *an end* to suffering. He will stomp on Satan. He will strangle sin. He will defeat death. No longer will the powers of nature or the evils of man have any place in this world when Christ makes it new and whole. This is where things are heading. Our suffering is *not* aimless or unnoticed. It is *anticipating* the new creation. It is *crying out* for salvation. It is *yearning* for the healing which God himself can and will provide.

## Our roles

Dear friends in Christ, what are we to do? Our problems are manifold and complicated, and our abilities are limited. How shall we save our neighbor from the fires of hell, or the fires out west, or the firing of an AR-15? Where is God, and why isn’t he doing anything? Doesn’t he see? Doesn’t he care?

Of course he sees. Of course he cares. But just as we don’t fully understand why people reject his free gifts, we also don’t understand why he lets evil persist for now.

Our role is not to critique our Creator or to condemn our judge. What, then *are* we to do? We are to hold fast to the Word of God, where God tells us who he is and what he is doing. We are to cry out to him in prayer, interceding for ourselves and for the world around us, drawing his attention to our suffering and pleading for his mercy.

We are to be proclaimers and receivers of the Gospel. We announce the king and his joyful celebration where all are welcome, even if they stop their ears or lash out at us in anger. We receive the king through the means he has established: his Word and Sacrament. We feast on his body and his blood, and we hear and believe his promises again and again. We proclaim the coming kingdom of God, where death and evil will be abolished, and life and peace will fill the earth. We cling to God’s promises, especially in this great tribulation. We walk by faith, not sight.

Thus says the Lord, the king of all creation: “Come to the wedding feast! Come to the celebration! I have prepared a place for *you* in my kingdom! Congratulations. Welcome. Have a seat. Grab a drink. Enjoy yourself.” Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.