

The Paradoxical Feast

Psalm 145:1-5
Matthew 22:1-14

Matthew opens chapter 22 with the words, “And again Jesus spoke to them in parables...” But what follows is not a parable. It is an allegory. Allegories use fictional characters to represent abstract ideas and/or truths. Moby Dick is an allegory. We have a retired professor of literature among us today, so I must take care to get this right. To me, Captain Ahab represents human pride and stubbornness. To me, the Great White Whale, Moby Dick himself, represents anything that has done us great harm in the past, and we now wish to harm greatly. Ahab, the protagonist, and Moby Dick, the antagonist, together represent our obsession with getting revenge when we feel embarrassed and humiliated.

The allegory in Matthew 22 tells the story of the history of God, the protagonist, and the children of Israel, the antagonists. Let us review the cast of characters. The king represents God the Father. The son represents Jesus himself. The servants sent to invite people to the feast represent the Old Testament prophets. The first group of people invited to the feast represent the Jews, the children of Israel. The second group invited, the ones who actually attend the feast, represent the rest of humanity, Gentiles like us. The interactions of these allegorical characters tell the story God's repeated attempts through history to enter into covenant with God's people. And their

repeated rejections of the invitations.

Now for a little historical context. Biblical scholarship has reached a broad consensus that Matthew was written around 90 AD. The Gospel has spread as far as Spain to the west and India to the east. Back at the home office, in Jerusalem, terrible things have happened. In the late 60's the Jews protested against Roman rule. They rioted and fought with the legionnaires. In 70 AD Emperor Titus dispatched an army led by a ruthless commander who leads the slaughter of a huge number of Jews. The army rampages throughout Galilee and Judea, killing and raping and torching the synagogues. The soldiers strip the high temple in Jerusalem of its gold and jeweled decorations, including two vast statues of oxen at the main entrance. They melt down some of the gold and make a large statue of a pig, which they place on the high altar, behind the veil that marks off the Holy of Holies. Of course the Law of God forbids both worshipping graven idols and eating pork.

After this desecration, the Romans destroy the temple, leaving only the western foundation. To this day the Jews have not rebuilt the Temple. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, one the three holiest shrines of Islam, stands on the site. That surviving foundation now goes by the name of the Wailing Wall. The allegory in Matthew 22 was written after the brutal repression of the Jewish revolt in 70 AD. God had spent centuries inviting the Israelites into a saving relationship. They refused the invitation. So soldiers invaded, “destroyed those murderers and burned their city” (Matthew 22:7). Next, God invited people the Jews consider inferior, folks the allegory literally calls

street people in the original Greek, the Gentiles. The paradox of this allegory is that what seems obviously true to the people listening to Jesus tell it, is not true. God wants faithful people, not people with a certain blood line.

Scholars generally agree the odd last part about the man without a wedding garment did not appear in the text until much later. They differ on its meaning. We will not cover it today because the first ten verses tell enough of a story for our consideration. The obvious application is, accept God's invitation. The feast represents the kingdom of heaven. God has invited us to sit down and revel in it. Jesus, the Son of God, has married us, the church. By the time Matthew was written churches had sprung up all over the Middle East, southern Europe and northern Africa. A great diversity of ethnic and tribal peoples populate those congregations. Many Gentiles have accepted the invitation. We are Gentiles, too. The feast is our wedding feast.

This feast is paradoxical in that the insiders, the Chosen People, refuse to attend and many of them die for their pride and stubbornness. Yet outsiders, the Gentiles, end up with seats at the table. In his work, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John Calvin wrote, "You may assuredly know that God the Father issues the invitation to eternal blessedness through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit offers us the gift of faith in God the Son, by which faith we obtain salvation by the grace of God." Put more simply, the Holy Spirit offers us faith in Jesus. When we accept that gift God graciously receives us. Accept the invitation.

Today is Pledge Sunday. Please, if you have not already done so, do make your pledge today. But let us turn aside from the financial aspect and turn toward another critically important aspect of stewardship. Awhile ago I mentioned that the church is the bride of Christ. Christians have always used this image, this allegory. It appears in the Apostle Paul's letters, written probably in the 50's of the first century AD. In fact, the image of the people of God as the bride of God appears all the way back in the Old Testament prophet Hosea. And Hosea was probably the first of the written prophets to speak and to write in the name of God. When we speak of the church as the bride of Christ we infer that we have an intimate relationship with him. But is this true? It is only when a plurality of the people in the church accept the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. Because faith not only saves, it also binds the members of the church to one another, as well as to Jesus Christ.

We cannot long remain the church without faith in the risen Jesus Christ. I have known congregations that seem to have forgotten this. They continue gathering but have forgotten why. They end up going through the motions and dwindle over time. They lose the Spirit. This is not one of those congregations. But unless we steward the Spirit we, too, will inevitably lose our faith, and with it our sense of purpose, of mission. Accept the invitation. Receive the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit. And use its inspiration, its energy, to continue Central Presbyterian's character as a beautiful bride of Christ.