

## Matthew 22:1-14

Anne Lamott has a great scene in one of her earlier essays where she imagines Jesus, out of patience with his disciples, just going off by himself bowling. He launches one heavy ball after another down the alley, knocking down the pins with a satisfying thwack. It's what you do when you want to do violence but you know better.

Today's story of the wedding banquet has that kind of energy. To really appreciate it, you should know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem, entered the Temple, and has overturned the moneychangers' tables. He has been disputing with the chief priests and elders, the religious establishment. There's a crowd listening too, but his main audience is this group of religious authorities, who want to know where he gets his authority, and who *really* want to know how soon they can get rid of him because he's so annoying. In fact, a chapter earlier, they explicitly say to each other that they wish they could say what they think but they're afraid of the crowd, which supports Jesus. So he's arguing with the religious establishment, and the argument is being observed by a crowd sympathetic to Jesus.

Thus the, shall we say brusque, energy of this parable. A king planned a lovely wedding feast, a celebration not just of a private family joy but of a social building block, a new family. He invited people who should be interested in and supportive of this future-oriented event, but they were all preoccupied with their own private interests, and declined. So he re-invited them, and they got irritated and killed his messengers.

Fine, said the king, and burned their city down. All those ungrateful invitees died. "I'll invite other people." He invited everyone else, and they came, "both good and bad" (and one wonders if they'd heard about the massacre). But once they'd all arrived, the king zeroed in on

one guest who wasn't properly attired, asked him about it, and when he didn't get an answer, had him thrown into outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Quite the festivity, eh? The whole tone of the parable is suppressed rage. And there's so much that doesn't make sense: punishing the invitees who declined, inviting people who don't even know the couple, expecting them to have wedding garments on them at a moment's notice, and harshly punishing the hapless guest who came without. I think we can cut to the chase here and say that Jesus is telling a story that all his audience should recognize as the same story told by the prophets, Amos and Jeremiah and the rest.

Once there was a nation ruled by a God so compassionate and powerful that that God released them from slavery. God gave them a law to live by that required mutual compassion, care for the vulnerable, justice regardless of wealth or social standing. This law, with such requirements as the forgiveness of all debt every seven years, would create a society in which everybody thrived, clothed in righteousness and *shalom*. And what did they do? They ignored the obligation to forgive debts, and allowed people to get so poor that they had to sell themselves into slavery. They lionized the powerful and ignored the vulnerable. To the invitation to live in a kingdom of shalom, they said, "No thanks, we have businesses to run, projects to pursue, our own private interests to attend to."

So their God sent Assyrians and Babylonians to burn down their cities and their splendid buildings and to slaughter their leaders. The survivors went into exile, and although they eventually returned, they now had to submit to the rule of kings who did not know their God. How did they cope with that? Some of them, nobody special, remembered the law and the vision of the kingdom, but others, focused on regaining their power, allied themselves with the

colonizers and claimed authority over the rest. Some of them, nobody special, managed to clothe themselves in righteousness, but those who had given up on that absurd vision of shalom, were clothed quite frankly in the emperor's new clothes and have no excuse for themselves. Those people are headed for outer darkness, with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's what Jesus is saying. He's speaking to the religious establishment, who know the Deuteronomic history, who know the law, and who just find it too costly and absurd to commit to the kingdom of heaven. They should recognize the voice of a prophet, and I bet they do. But they don't like it any more than Jeremiah's audience liked it. The rest of the wedding guests love it though.

In the parable, the first invitees declined the invitation because they were more focused on their own private enterprises than on the shared social good of a new family being established. A wedding feast wasn't just a fun party; it was at some level a society-wide ratification of a building block of the future. Turning down that invitation is like saying, "Yeah, that's a nice idea, but in real life I need to look out for myself. This vision of shalom, of everyone having a place at the table, that's just not practical. I choose the real world." Matthew always sees a choice. The magi who visit Herod have a choice about whom to identify as king of the Jews, Herod or the nameless baby. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, although the weeds are allowed to grow all season, the landowner promises that they'll be sorted out come harvest time. The wedding invitees have a choice about which kingdom to commit to, and the first ones choose Caesar's.

In a sense, we are living in the raggedy, improvised world of exiles returned home but still under the thumb of an alien kingdom. Lawmakers under the golden dome are accelerating

their attacks on the public good, from outlawing gender-affirming surgery to refusing trans rights to schoolchildren to siphoning off public funds for fundamentalist Christian schools. But last Sunday some of us went to a rally at the Capitol that looked like the wedding feast: it was a rally for LGBTQ rights in our schools, and I mean to tell you. There were high school kids there who were decked out in *all* their wedding garments: pink pants, false eyelashes, big purses, fancy hats, very new facial hair. And there were old people like us, clothed in righteousness and puffy coats. The energy there was defiance and kindness. One kid carried a sign that said, "Here's what Jesus said about being gay: [and the rest of the sign was blank]." One speaker was a soccer coach who coaches a team of non-binary and trans kids who want to play soccer. Another was a trans city council member from Hiawatha who told the crowd that our great-grandfathers didn't die at Gettysburg so we could have a society in which some people have to be invisible, and our grandfathers didn't die on Normandy Beach so fascists could take over in the US. Another was a man whose young husband had died by suicide because he couldn't cope with the accumulation of trauma throughout his teenaged years. I am here to tell you that there are plenty of people who are committed to the kingdom of God, whether they use that language or not, and that kindness and inclusivity are the way we're going to prevail.

Because we are going to prevail. The religious establishment in the Temple was frightened of Jesus, that's why they wanted to get rid of him. As we all know, they did . . . until they didn't. Because there were also the witnesses. Let me close with Dorothee Sölle's poem, "When he came."

I don't as they put it believe in god  
but to him I cannot say no hard as I try  
take a look at him in the garden

when his friends ran out on him  
his face wet with fear  
and with the spit of his enemies  
him I have to believe

Him I can't bear to abandon  
to the great disregard for life  
to the monotonous passing of millions of years  
to the moronic rhythm of work leisure and work  
to the boredom we fail to dispel  
in cars in beds in stores

That's how it is they say what do you want  
uncertain and not uncritically  
I subscribe to the other hypothesis  
which is his story  
that's not how it is he said for god is  
and he staked his life on this claim

Thinking about it I find  
one can't let him pay alone  
for his hypothesis  
so I believe him about  
god

The way one believes another's laughter  
his tears  
or marriage or no for an answer  
that's how you'll learn  
to believe him about life  
promised to all

God of celebration, you have invited all people to rejoice in the goodness of your love. Help us to be hospitable to all people at your banquet, so that all might receive your blessing. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.