

*May God bless our hearing and understanding of this sacred word... We are all waiting for how you'll unpack THIS parable, Rev. Judy, good luck!*

Thank you, Megan – I guess.

It's obvious to me that Matthew had something traumatic in his childhood. The gnashing of teeth phrase occurs 7 times in the Bible and 5 of them are in Matthew's gospel.

This parable is told in a slightly more upbeat way in Luke. There is no King, only a host, and no killing of slaves or revenging with fire and fury. Based on most biblical scholarship that would indicate that Luke's version was the original and Matthew added his own special touches - I told you I think he had a rough childhood.

It is pretty gruesome to us but in Matthew's day this parable would have been almost beyond belief. No one would refuse a King's invitation. You just didn't say no to a King. And you especially don't seize his slaves and kill them. The King's response is the most believable part of this parable - a man of power and pride - he would not let people disrespect him in this way without consequences.

But, I've always focused on this last poor guest who was dressed wrong. I've always pictured him as a street person, perhaps having already drunk way too much - I visualized him in dirty and ripped clothing. But now I have a different image. So there's this palace, where the King lives, it has huge iron gates attached to thick, tall pillars of stone. On the day of the King's son's wedding throngs of people, from all walks of life, all dressed up, are streaming into the courtyard, music can be heard, roasting beef can be smelled. Now I picture this unfortunate one coming upon this scene and just following the crowd - out of curiosity. He hasn't gone home to grab the right clothes; he doesn't even know it's a wedding. It's a party! He joins it. He's a party guy and instead of focusing on what others are wearing, I bet he's salivating and trying to make his way to the bar. His luck continues, he thinks, when the King, the actual King approaches him and addresses him as friend. He thinks he has really lucked out. But, apparently he doesn't know the reputation of this King and learns it just when he was congratulating himself on his good fortune. Suddenly the King's slaves grab him and bind him and throw him into the outer darkness - I picture them standing at the edge of the earth and hurling this package out to where he is caught up in the force that surrounds the planet. Like

Charlie on the MTA, he is still there - wailing and grinding what teeth he has left.

It's pretty easy to become distracted by this poor fellow and gloss over the initial group of guests and the destruction of their city. But they are a key part of the parable. To begin - why are these guests not coming? In Luke's version they all have excuses. In Matthew's we don't hear the invitees offer any reason or even an apology. They just refuse to come. And when asked a second time, they are so annoyed they kill the messengers. These people are more involved in their own lives, in what's going on in the moment, to stop long enough to take in what is being offered. These people were not honored by their invitation. They cannot imagine anything more engaging than what they are doing at the moment.

We know here where Jesus is going with this parable - God has laid out a banquet for us, to celebrate his son, and we'd rather go to McDonald's. Once, when our daughter Autumn was little, two years or so, we had one of those glow sticks that you snap and they emit a bright color which is really best in the dark. We thought she'd be intrigued by it, so we brought her out on the deck rather late at night. It was plenty dark enough for her to get the effect. As we prepared to dazzle and amaze her with our 99 cent trinket, we tried to get her to focus on this carnival toy, "Look, Autumn, look - it lit up - it's now a bright yellow light. Look! Look!" we said. But Autumn would not look, she was yelling in wonder "the moon, the moon" she said as she pointed to the sky. "No, Autumn. Look at this." She continued to point and call out the moon. At some point it hit us - Autumn knew the difference between a banquet and McDonald's. We didn't.

It's sort of like that with these two sets of guests. I imagine the first group were wealthy and important people - after all they were on the King's wedding guest list. They, no doubt, were not lacking food or comfort. Told of a banquet, they were not impressed let alone honored. The second set of guests may well have contained wealthy and well fed people; we do not know. What we do know is they understood the moment - the sacred moment of a wedding, the celebratory moment of a feast. They quickly got their finest clothing - probably a range from Dior to Goodwill - but meant for a wedding. Except the last guy who didn't even know where he was or why - who like the first invitees, was interested in what was in it for him with no regard for what was actually going on.

Jesus sums it up for us in just a few words: for many are called, but few are chosen. Just what I was afraid of, maybe just what you are afraid

of. The line in heaven is long, but few get to go beyond the gates. Is that what Jesus is saying with this elaborate parable. If we're thinking about being tossed into the outer darkness, this parable is extremely lopsided. Only one soul was rejected, but many, many were called, invited. We quiver in fear of not being chosen, of being bound hand and foot, of God rejecting us. We read a pronouncement like this and think are we good enough, will we be chosen, or will we be found wanting? It's about God, but we like to make it about us.

God spreads a banquet before us. God spreads a BANQUET before us. God spreads a banquet before US. And we barely pay it any mind. We are not saying no to God, we are saying later, and then we go on to scurry around trying to scrape together enough for a snack. It is we who have chosen, chosen to put the banquet further down on our list and thereby, distancing ourselves from God's banquet, making it quite clear what our priorities are. It's a banquet - does God really want guests who have just eaten. It's a banquet - of love and beauty and community; of splendor that can arise in the least likely of places; places where one hand offers another a bit of food, a comforting squeeze. It's a feast of being listened to, really listened to; a place of hearing, really hearing, understanding, of God's presence within us; of God's strength with us. Many are called - the banquet is there, arrayed before you, open your eyes, look. God is yearning for us to be drawn to the sacred and divine, to let it into our soul so deeply we couldn't possibly ignore it again.

Ken Orth recites a poem about a peanut seller at the Grand Canyon. He's been selling there for years, his table before him piled high with bags of peanuts, his back to the Canyon. Each day is the same, until one day, a customer has a mirror that is faced toward the Canyon and the peanut seller sees the beauty he's been so close to but so far from his whole life. He can't believe what he's been missing, right there. He immediately upends his table, sends peanuts flying and spends the rest of his days in awe at the splendor.

I know you might be thinking, "What is she nuts? Try being a parent, an employee, a teacher, a volunteer." It is easy these days to think we do not have time for awe at God's banquet. Our lives have become so unpredictable and difficult. We don't say no to God, we say later. God is saying NOW - clothe yourselves in me and you will go through your days filled with awe. It's true - we all know it. Unlike the first invitees, it isn't that we've better things to do; it is that we have so much we must control we

don't dare let go, even for a banquet. God doesn't ask us to let go of who and what we must care for; God wants to be invited into those challenges with us so we will experience the banquet that has been right there all the time. May you find it nourishing and may it lead you through your days in awe at the splendor. AMEN