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“Go out to the main roads and invite into the feast whomever you find” (Matthew 22:9).

Ezek 36:23-28; Matt 22:1-14

Many of the parables toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel have an edge to them that reveals the apocalyptic tensions present in the early church after the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome and the diaspora of both Jews and Christians from the region. Today’s parable of the wedding feast, like the parables of the vineyard tenants and the curse of the fig tree before it, have a severity about them that seems uncharacteristic of Jesus. Kings send armies to destroy those who kill the messengers or reject their invitations. Wedding guests without the right garments are ejected into the outer darkness. A tree out of season is withered for lack of fruit. Yet, these allegories fit the times Matthew was writing for and reflect the painful quarrels raging between early Christians and the rabbis trying to salvage orthodox Judaism.

Matthew's Gospel will mirror these debates later in Chapter 22 with the sayings of Jesus attacking the scribes and Pharisees from the previous generation to serve the current arguments. Some of these texts will become unfortunate seeds of future anti-Semitism that would take root and reappear in medieval rampages, the pogroms of eastern Europe and the rise of Hitler.

We go to the Scriptures to find Jesus. Exegesis takes us beyond literalism to the layered reality of the texts so we can discern the early traditions of the first preachers and the sayings of Jesus from later applications and interpretation that address contemporary needs, as Matthew does for his community in the post-Jerusalem period. For example, the scene in today's parable where servants are sent out to the byways and highways to welcome everyone matches the Jesus' compassion for outsiders and the expansion of his ministry beyond Israel. This outreach and concern for the poor will get full expression in the parable in Matthew 25 of the last judgment based on how disciples find Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and outcasts.

The image of a wedding feast was central to the biblical notion of God's covenant with his people. Jesus celebrated this nuptial theme in his preaching about the fidelity and intimacy God was offering. The urgency of our response to God's invitation to join this love story was no doubt part of his message. Failure to respond to this love story brought Jesus to tears when he wept over Jerusalem. His own willingness to die to save a violent world was his ultimate parable of God's extravagant mercy for a wayward world.

The Gospel as the God's living Word to our world is a plea to come to the feast. No threats or reprisals are part of this invitation, except the ones we bring upon ourselves by failing to know the hour of our visitation. The church is sent to the margins and not the ramparts, outreach and reconciliation are the only strategies Jesus sanctioned to gather everyone into the Beloved Community. Mercy declares it the feast of enemies as well as friends. There is room for everyone. We respond to the Word by looking at our own world, its crises and challenges, and asking, "What would Jesus do?"

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