

We continue in a series of difficult parables, into one which features rather nasty surprises. Jesus' original parable is remembered somewhat differently in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Matthew's version that we read today, a testy edge has been added to intensify the critique of Israel for largely failing to accept the status of Jesus as Messiah.

Remember that in Matthew's memory, Jesus told these parables to and against his critics in Jerusalem, the priests and elders who had questioned his authority.

They rejected Jesus, and Matthew, retelling the parable 40 years later, was struggling with the rejection of Jesus by those who kept in the ways of those priests and elders.

Matthew wrote after the destruction of the Temple/much of the city by the Romans in 70 AD, a catastrophe that he saw as inextricably linked to the city's rejection of Jesus and of the church. The harsh surprises in this story that make it nearly unbelievable thus testify to the pain and alienation of Christian and Jew in the late first century.

As Luke, a gentler evangelist, remembered the parable, it was a simple story of guests who made excuses not to attend a great dinner.

They had been invited and were sent reminders by the host's slave.

They all begged off, fairly politely, saying they had just bought some oxen that needed tending or a farm they needed to inspect

or had just married;

please accept my regrets.

Receiving those regrets, the host sent his slaves to bring in whoever would come, the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.

Matthew has added to it the violence of the guests against the messengers,

the great rage of the host and his violence against his hoped-for guests,

and the final rejection of the man who had no wedding garment.

Each of those angry moments is unexpected and not to be found in Luke.

Who attacks a servant bringing an invitation?

Who makes war and destroys others over party invitations?

Who, having invited in a great crowd of good and bad, singles out one for rejection?

This series of nasty surprises is the outcome of the story's allegorization,

which was Matthew's way of wrestling with the fact that Israel did not receive the prophets,

Jesus,

or the missionaries sent after him,

all of whom are represented by characters and moments in the story.

I guess that is the ultimate, nasty surprise that the first Christians lived with;

that their Savior was not understood as such by most of the people to whom he had been sent, whose he was, whose law and traditions he affirmed and fulfilled.

The Jews who did believe in him and the Gentiles who joined them and then overwhelmed them spent centuries wondering how this could have been.

How could Israel not see what they saw?

How could God let this be this way?

It is the ultimate question we ask in the face of tragedy and brokenness; why?

And we know the futility of the question, on some levels.
Why shootings, hurricanes, and fires; why injustice and rejection?
Why can't everyone just believe in Jesus and do right? Why?
This story wrestles with all that without answering our question.

The rejection of Jesus by most of Israel likely doesn't enter your mind too much.
It was a big problem for Matthew but doesn't seem so for us.
Perhaps we might wonder about those who were once near to us in the family of faith who are not any longer.
Every church has a long roster of members, some with a little "i" in the next column, for inactive.
There are some delightful people who even pledge to support this church every year and who don't even make it on Christmas or Easter.
I think about them and wonder why.
Is it the loss of faith?
Is it my preaching?
One inactive member told me years ago that she was too fat to come to church, which wasn't really true, but it revealed a tragic shame.
Whatever the reason, Matthew's testy intensification of Jesus' parable would warn us off from creating a dramatic story to reflect our disappointment in the loss of such members.
We don't need speculation or demonization make it easier to understand those who have made other choices.
We may regret what they choose but need not create a tale of violence to understand them.

Nor with others in our world who have never had Christian faith or life in the church.
We have no need to demonize them or do violence against them,
in our heads,
with our voices,
or with our hands.
We hear St. Paul's voice today, in a passage written from a prison cell,
after he had fallen out finally and fully with the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem,
as he awaited his condemnation at the hands of the pagan Romans, saying remarkable things,
Cross-like things: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

That last wedding guest is the one who can speak to our situation, a character our brother Matthew might have spent more time pondering.
He was the one dragged in when the intended guests would not come,
a symbol of Gentiles like us who found a place in Israel's story.
Yet he symbolizes the apathetic, undisciplined, inattentive Christian,
the one lacking an authentic faith.
And you see, he's in, not out, of the church, until the final sorting.

He signals that we churchy insiders don't get to imagine that we are perfect.
We can't imagine that our name on the church rolls
or the familiar dent our bottom has made in the cushion of our usual pew guarantee us some
spiritual superiority to those who have not received the good news of Christ.
Even in here, we need to put on the Lord Jesus; we need to be clothed in him,
with sincerity and a holy fervor,
that we might live in his love and the usual gentleness of his Spirit,
finding meaning and purpose and salvation, come what may.