

**Saying Grace**  
**Psalm 23**  
**Matthew 22:1–14**  
**October 12, 2014**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Clemson, SC**

Whew! When I read this text I want to do like Manhattan Transfer: “Operator, give me Information. Information, give me Long Distance. Long Distance, give me Heaven. Heaven, give me Jesus on the line.” And I would ask him, “What in the world were you thinking when you told this parable?”

Maybe it is Matthew’s editorial work on Jesus’ parable that really causes us to cringe. For Luke records a similar but different story in his gospel at chapter 14. But Luke’s Jesus tells a parable that is much kinder and briefer. The king’s reaction was not extreme, especially to the point of violence. And there was no guest missing his wedding robe either because it was not a wedding banquet. Matthew’s Jesus talks about extreme violence here. How can this parable be the Good News? I will take that Lord is My Shepherd from Psalm 23 any day.

But this word is what we are given by Jesus according to Matthew. Sometimes it takes more out of us to find the good in the Good News especially in parables because they are stories with deeper, hidden meanings. They turn things upside down and inside out so we are called to examine, wonder and look deeply into them. For centuries most scholars have looked through a single lens seeing an allegorical interpretation of the Final Judgement in this parable. This angle of interpretation has been a basis for anti-Semitism and supersessionism, where Christians were chosen to replace the Jews in the covenant. That is an interpretation which has done much harm in the interfaith community and in the church. Any view of the Final Judgment depicted here is not much better for the Christian believer either.

What has always bothered me most is that to see *God as the king* in this parable paints a portrayal of God that resorts to violence to carry out justice. I am looking for the character of *The Lord is my Shepherd*. I want to see God’s sovereign love in working out justice, rather than witness a God who stoops low to human expectations of retribution. I want to believe in a loving God who is above violence that appears evil.

So you see, the traditional allegorical interpretation of this parable disturbs my faith. I invite you to join me in considering another view of this parable.<sup>1</sup> Helping ground that view is the Greek where it explicitly describes this ruler as “a man, a king.”<sup>2</sup> There is also a verbal idiom here about the kingdom of heaven *may be compared* to a man, a king which gives a sense of comparing opposites, not similarities.<sup>3</sup> With that understanding the king in the parable looks more like the man Herod than God. Herod invited the Magi to come and give him news of the newborn king, but they were warned

in a dream not to entreat Herod's wishes, so the Magi declined returning to him. Herod was mad when his plot did not work and then he killed all the baby boys.<sup>4</sup>

The king in our story is no better than Herod. This man, this king waged war on his list of elite guests to show his power over them. Imagine what the rest of his kingdom was thinking when this occurred. Our world still has despot rulers controlling peoples today. No realm of power systems is exempt from such corruption, misplaced power, and lies. Even start up groups mask as kingdoms of this world. ISIS creates its own form of "Come to the bargaining table, or else!" "What I really want is your loyalty, so I will force my wrath upon you until I get it." It is the "or else" where human sacrifice of souls who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ shows forth great faith in the midst of **the valley of the shadow of death. May they fear no evil, for God is with them. And may God's rod and staff comfort their families.**<sup>5</sup>

The king had been snubbed and so he retaliated with violence. He tried to keep up appearances by sending out more slaves to invite anyone to come. He is a tyrant who is desperate to have someone, anyone follow him, good or bad. And he will resort to coercion to get them to his table. The Greek uses a negative sense of compelling them as in controlling them, requiring them to come.<sup>6</sup> They remember what he did to those to did not attend, and so they go.

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:<sup>7</sup>*

At the wedding hall one guest shows up without the proper party clothes. Scholars have speculated that he did not prepare to come, that he was ungrateful for the invitation from this king.<sup>8</sup> That might work if the king is God and this is the final judgment, but if the king is a murderous bully, then who would be grateful? Matthew portrayed this king as inhospitable because he did not provide a wedding garment for his guest, which was the custom of that day. Matthew speaks to such surface matters when he records Jesus teaching his disciples **"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"**<sup>9</sup>

Then again maybe this guest does not wear a wedding robe because he will not show allegiance to the human king. Instead the guest becomes the persecuted, the poster child for the king's out of control violence. When the king proceeds with the inquisition about the wedding robe, the guest is silent. The silence increases the king's frustration and so he once again turns to violence to have the guest bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness. Here we find the Christ figure in the parable, like Jesus before the high priest only days later stands silent.<sup>10</sup> And then bound before Pilate, Jesus is condemned to death by a corrupt empire. His silence is not agreement, but a mark of integrity, where Jesus will not even engage in any more questions.<sup>11</sup> His authority has been established.

It was Wednesday of Passion Week. Here was the Passover lamb before the slaughter. The chief priests and elders were poised to catch Jesus by questioning his authority. So he told this parable as the third in a series to confound them. After the second parable they realized he was talking about them. After telling this final one, they were frustrated enough *then* to arrest him, so they plotted to trap Jesus. They needed to conspire with Rome to do it.

Jesus turned the Roman world upside down and this parable compares how a man, a king, even implying the emperor would have thought of himself as the king of heaven. Anyone speaking of the kingdom of heaven would be resisting the present empire of Rome. Jesus was a revolutionary. The wedding guest without the robe was resisting the man, the king, the emperor. Tensions grew between the infant church and Rome with emperors wielding destructive power with each succeeding reign. Eventually Caligula declared himself a god. In the midst of this volatile world Matthew writes his record of Jesus, the Son of God.

The outer darkness was upon Jesus as the crucifixion was days away. Jesus' words in Matthew 11:12 were coming true, *"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffered violence and the violent take it by force."* The violent try to make the kingdom of heaven into a noun, like a group of people, a church, an establishment, program, or even an emotional experience, usually of fear.<sup>12</sup>

The kingdom of heaven is not of this world but is God's sovereign activity—a living acknowledgement of life greater than any human kingdom. However, the kingdom of heaven is as real as a *growing mustard seed<sup>13</sup>, rising yeast<sup>14</sup>, children leading others to the king<sup>15</sup>, being persecuted for righteousness<sup>16</sup>, keeping the commandments<sup>17</sup>, not worrying, eating with the saints, teaching and proclaiming the Good News<sup>18</sup>, curing diseases and sickness<sup>19</sup>, suffering violence<sup>20</sup>, understanding the word, sowing good seed<sup>21</sup>, finding a hidden treasure<sup>22</sup>, searching for fine pearls<sup>23</sup>, catching diverse fish in a net<sup>24</sup>, being a generous land owner<sup>25</sup>, and producing good fruit<sup>26</sup>.*

God's kingdom is full of *goodness and mercy and shall follow us all the days of our lives and we will know it is the kingdom of heaven for we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*<sup>27</sup> And no other kingdom can compare to that dwelling.

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<sup>1</sup> In researching about violence in this text, I came across several scholarly articles that share in my discomfort with the traditional allegorical interpretation. I share with them many of the insights they note. I encourage these articles for further reading on this text as they expound far greater into the whys and hows of this alternative interpretation where God is not the violent king and the guest at the banquet without the wedding robe is the most Christ-like person in the parable.

“Matthew’s Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt. 22:1-14) by Marianne Blickenstaff, Academic Acquisitions Editor at Westminster/John Knox Press. Published by the Review and Expositor, Vol. 109, Spring 2012, pages 261-268.

“Violent Endings in Matthew’s Parables and Christian Nonviolence” by Barbara E. Reid, O.P., Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL 60615. Published in The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, 2004, pages 237-255.

<sup>2</sup> GNT Matthew 22:2 Ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὅστις ἐποίησεν γάμους τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ. The Greek specifically notes “a man, a king” and not “a king” thus this king is a human being and should not be interpreted as symbolic of God.

<sup>3</sup> GNT Matthew 22:2 Ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὅστις ἐποίησεν γάμους τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” The Greek indicates an idiom of the verb Ὁμοιώθη “make like” (indicative aorist passive 3rd person singular). This gives a sense of comparison of opposites where Ὁμοία ἐστὶν as found in Matthew 13:31 reads “is like” and uses the combination of Ὁμοία “of the same nature as, like” (adjective nominative feminine singular) along with ἐστὶν the being verb “is” (indicative present active 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 2.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 23:4, adapted.

<sup>6</sup> GNT Matthew 22:9 πορεύεσθε οὖν ἐπὶ τὰς διεξόδους τῶν ὁδῶν καὶ ὅσους εἴν εὔρητε καλέσατε εἰς τοὺς γάμους. “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” The Greek εἴν εὔρητε καλέσατε presents a subjunctive aorist active verb with an imperative aorist active verb which functions as a subjunctive imperative perfect which is more the forceful “if or when you find, you will invite.”

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 23:5a.

<sup>8</sup> Lester, Carter, “Matthew 22:1-14” in Interpretation, July 2008 (page 310) quoting Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 1997, 248.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:25.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 25:57-68, see verse 63.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 27:11-14.

<sup>12</sup> Boing, Eugene M. “Matthew” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Matthew-Mark*, Vol. 8, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995), 293.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 13:31.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 13:33.

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15.

<sup>16</sup> Mathew 5:10.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 5:19.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 9:35.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 4:23; 9:35.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 11:12.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 13:24.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 13:44.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 13:45.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 13:47.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 20:1-16.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 21:33-46.

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 23:6, adapted.