

# Paths of Transformation

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 15, 2017

Matthew 22:1-14

So let's see if we have this straight.

A king wanted to celebrate the marriage of his son. He sent his servants out with save the date cards to let the guests know they had been invited. When everything was ready, he sent word was time for the party, but no one wanted to come. So he sent the servants out again and still they didn't want to attend. The kinder invited guests made excuses. Others seized and killed the servants. So the king got mad and burned their city. Then he sent the servants out again to beg people to come to the party – good, bad, it did not matter. Soon the wedding hall was filled with guests as it should be. But one man wasn't dressed right. So the king threw him out. End of story.

How in the world is the kingdom of heaven like this?

So first we need to clear up one thing. When Jesus said kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel, he didn't mean heaven. Where Mark and Luke wrote Kingdom of God, Matthew wrote Kingdom of Heaven. Some think this was because Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience. Jewish people then and now avoided saying the name of God, so to avoid offending them Matthew used the phrase Kingdom of Heaven. This is not a parable about getting into heaven someday. This is about living God's life now as Jesus taught.

Let's clear up something else. Jesus told this story during Holy Week, just before the religious authorities seized, arrested, and killed him. Matthew's gospel was written not long after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire. The people who first read this gospel remembered when the city was burned. As a result, many read this as a condemnation of the Jewish people. After all, the Jews were first invited to God's party. They killed the prophets and killed Jesus. So the kingdom was taken from them. But we should never read the stories of Jesus as if they were just for one time in history. They are never just about one group of people. They are about all of us. So this is not a parable about the Jews. It is about us. How do we, all of us, respond to God's invitation?

Jesus said some people are not that interested. It's not that they are opposed to God's party, but they're busy. They have other things to do.

Some people are outright hostile to the idea. They want nothing to do with the marriage or the party. They even kill the messenger. So don't be surprised if the good news of God is rejected.

Where this story starts to look more like a parable of the kingdom is that this king did not give up, not even after hearing lame excuses, not even after being rejected, not even after death. The king did not go home. He did not sulk. He did not keep all the wedding cake for himself. Instead he sent his servants out again to round up anyone who would show up. Good people, bad people. It did not matter. There was room for everyone.

This is why this is a parable of the kingdom. It is glorious good news. God is throwing a party. Revelation calls it the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is the union of heaven and earth, the ways of God coming to life in this world, the way of peace and abundance and unity and welcome. And thanks be to God we are all invited. And we get to invite others. You don't have to be perfect or respectable. You don't have to have your act together. There's room for everyone. Come on in.

But there was one caveat, Jesus said. To come to this party, to join in the marriage feast, you do have to be willing to change.

Many biblical scholars point out it was common in those days for the wedding host to give guests proper attire to wear. This was not a matter of some poor guy not owning a tux. The guest had the right wedding robe. Someone had given him a jacket. He just didn't want to put it on, who knows why. He wanted to come to the king's wedding banquet and stay exactly the same. And that wasn't possible. So the king sent him away. Many are called. Everyone is invited. Few stay. Few change in ways that let them in on the celebration.

The glorious good news of the gospel is that God loves us as we are. Good or bad, we're all invited and desired and wanted at the feast. But the even better good news is that God loves us enough not to leave us this way. The life of God will change us if we let it.

This is true for all us as individuals. And it is true for this congregation. God loves St. Thomas as we are. We're not perfect. But we're faithful. We embrace the call of Jesus to love everyone. We're friendly. We're caring. We pray together and really mean it. We're bold in our witness to the dignity of every human being. We're a safe haven for some and a springboard to action for others. God loves St. Thomas as we are.

But God loves us enough not to leave us this way.

Our theme this fall has been Paths to Transformation. A group on Wednesdays is studying a survey of the Bible called We Make the Road by Walking. Pub Theology a week from Tuesday is looking at Transforming Questions. The Episcokids are studying 20<sup>th</sup> Century saints whose lives were transformed by the love of God. God loves us enough to transform us and move us down the path to becoming more like Jesus.

Paths to Transformation is also our stewardship theme. How is God changing us? What is the wedding garment God invites us to wear?

You've heard some of our vestry's thoughts on this subject already. We did a comprehensive study of the church earlier this year. The study assessed our ministries and how we feel about where we are right now. The news was good. St. Thomas is strong. Our ministries are working well. We are ready for God to do more with us.

The study also identified how we hope God will change us. We want to continue to grow in membership and attendance, not because we're anxious about decline but because we know this community needs what we have to offer. We want to strengthen ministries of healing and service. And we want to become more generous so that all of this can happen.

Using this feedback, the goals our vestry identified for 2018 basically come down to two things: be strengthened internally so we can do more externally in our community. Our budget goal for 2018 will help us keep our current ministries and programs strong, use our resources in more sustainable ways, and give more attention to the world around us. That's our Path to Transformation.

It matters.

It matters because too many people today are turning aside from God's invitation, especially young people. You've heard the studies that note a dramatic rise in the "nones" – people who claim no religious affiliation. Rachel Held Evans explains the studies this way -

*What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.*

*We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.*

*We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers.*

*We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.*

*We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.*

*We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.*

*Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.*

The Episcopal Church in general and St. Thomas in particular has a special calling in this time in history. We are a home for the spiritually homeless. We go into the world as servants of God and continue to offer the invitation.

The pledges many of you are offering this day are like a wedding garment. They are a sign that you want this community to join in God's celebration and invite the world in.

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.