

Matthew 22: 1-14 "When God Isn't the King in the Story" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/11/20

A pastor was sharing a children's moment, where every week the children could anticipate her making a new point about Jesus. This particular week, she began by holding up a stuffed squirrel and asking, "Boys and girls, do you know what this is?" Complete silence. The pastor asked again but no response (Oh, I remember those moments when you think, this is definitely not going as planned). Finally, she said, "There is nothing to be afraid of, can anyone just tell me what this is?" One little boy shyly raised his hand and offered, "Gee, I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure looks like a squirrel to me."

Paul Neuchterlien asserts that something like this is happening for us in our parable from Jesus today. If we are honest, most of us have grown up hearing this parable and assuming certain characters represented God or Jesus and the others represented us, or others. In Jesus' parables, we are used to kings or lords symbolizing God, so as soon as Jesus begins "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king..." we immediately hear this king as being God. But then Jesus goes on and describes some horrendous behavior on the part of this king. It then becomes an ugly parable and most of us have either ignored it or tried to clean it up in the re-telling of it. I have looked through my past sermons and I have actually done that more than once. But today, I just can't do it, because if there is anything our society needs right now, it is bold honesty and integrity. So what you and I heard is a parable about a king who sent out invitations to his son's wedding. So far so good, but it all goes bad from there. Those who were invited decided not to attend and some of them were so bothered by the invitation, they roughed up and killed some of the king's messengers. The king is enraged and sends out an army to kill them. Plus, in an attempt to show them who really is in charge, the king burns

down the whole city! Then the king tells his slaves to go out and invite anybody and everybody – good, bad, he didn't care – just fill the place up with guests. For some, the story could end now with a nice summary, "And they all lived happily ever after," if we were ignoring the fact that the king's behavior was atrocious. In fact, I wonder if any of us would dare turn the king down after what he did to the last invitees? Not to mention, the whole town is on fire so literally you go to the castle or you perish. On top of this, the Greek seems to indicate that when the king says "invite" a second time, the slaves now clearly understand he means "seize." Verse 10 can be translated, "The slaves went out into the streets and seized all whom they found, both good and bad." Clearly, when the narcissistic king's world falls into extreme disorder, astounding measures of intimidation, manipulation, and force must be used to put it back in order. Therefore, the fuller the room, the better, after all, his reputation is at stake. At this point, the king's behavior reflects more someone like Herod, Putin, Kim Jong-un, or those similar, then God, don't you think? Leaders who stake their worth on the size of a crowd or how much they get their own way have very little to do with God.

Scholar Marty Aiken uncovers another hint to understanding this troubling parable as he focuses on the actual verb the people used to turn down the invitation the first time. The verb means to disregard or neglect. In other words, those first invited disregarded the invitation. It is the only instance this verb is used in the gospels and it seems to indicate that the invitees are making a conscious choice not to attend the wedding affair. Jesus uses language that indicates their decision is based on their personal will, rather than having some other conflicting or unforeseen circumstance interfere. Aiken notes that according to societal rules of the day, if the king is issuing the invitation and the king's heir is the one getting married, this is not a social

event as much as it is a political one. To disregard or neglect such an invitation is not as much a *faux pas* as it is a rebellion. Unlike the 2nd group who were literally seized, these earlier folks are wealthy or powerful enough to risk defying a king they despise; they are under the impression they still have a vote in where they go and what they support. As Rev. Janet Hunt asks us, "What if the reason they didn't attend is a sign of protest? What if they don't drop everything and go because the promises of the king are false or the king's rule is unjust, or because the poor have been left in poverty with no recourse? While it is hard to justify the mistreating and killing of the slaves issuing the invitations, we don't know what happened between the slaves and the people before such violence. Some people who live in oppressive regimes feel they have no other choice than to respond in ways that are reprehensible just to survive. Certainly, it is worth noting that not all the town's people killed the king's messengers, yet the king, in his vengeful ways, not only punishes the murderers, but everyone else who called that city home."

As with other parables, this one has many layers needing to be peeled away to get to its heart. And Jesus isn't even done with the story as the king notices one man, one single man in the crowd who isn't wearing a wedding robe. The king goes up to him and says, "Friend." The original Greek has a derogatory tone, "*Friend*, how did you get in here without the proper attire?" The man does not answer, only silence. Not going along with the festivities, this one man stands in stark contrast to the flagrant violence and harsh rhetoric that has spawned the whole affair. The solo figure's presence seems to unnerve the king. His silence must have infuriated the king who has him bound and thrown out into the darkness to suffer. The end. And at the end, we have to wonder if like the earlier children's moment, can it be that a squirrel

is just a squirrel, a king is just an earthly king here, one who might be very familiar to Jesus' audience? If so, then who is the one symbolizing the Divine? The key may be in the silence.

Julie Morris notes that we have to remember in Matthew's Gospel, this parable is told when Jesus is already in Jerusalem. He has just gotten into an argument with the priests in the Temple about authority and by whose authority Jesus is teaching what he is teaching. In just a few days, he will stand silent before Pilate, the imperial power, and then he will be bound hand and foot to the cross where he will weep and gnash his teeth. Possibly the story is not saying that the kingdom of heaven is like the king in this parable but instead can be compared to this earthly king, a ruthless dictator, who is confronted with a silent and peaceful protestor standing in contrast as a witness on behalf of the kingdom of heaven. If we want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like, don't look to the rage-filled, vengeful king with the National Guard at his side and constantly focused on his popularity and posterity than the poverty of his people, there is nothing new there; instead look at the unarmed, silent man who is bound and cast out into the darkness by that king. If you want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like, look at Jesus, learn from Jesus.

Jan Karski was an underground courier for the Polish government-in-exile and one of the first to deliver eye-witness accounts of Nazi atrocities in the Warsaw ghetto to the Allies. He was captured by and escaped from both the Gestapo and the Soviets. He was brought to America and President Roosevelt who listened to him without comment. He talked to Justice Frankfurter who didn't believe him about the concentration camps. He gave lectures around the country, wrote a book about the Holocaust in 1944, and then dropped out of sight. Claude Lanzmann convinced Karski to break his silence after 30 years for an epic TV documentary he

was working on, which brought Karski out of obscurity. When asked why, after all of those years of being silent, yet still holding to his witness of truth and integrity, he had decided to speak again, Karski said there were 2 reasons. First, because a whole generation has grown up not knowing what happened, not knowing what racism and hatred toward others can do if it is not opposed. Secondly, he said, "I did it because I believe one day God will ask me, 'Karski, I gave you a soul. Your body is gone, but your soul is mine. I gave it to you. What did you do with your soul?' And I will have to answer." Maybe the same will be asked of us. Maybe we will find the grace to follow Jesus' example as one who could not, who would not pretend to honor falsehood, oppression and injustice but boldly stood in opposition to the tyrants among us. Jesus reveals there is no better use of a soul. Thanks be to God.