

Parable or allegory: Does it matter?

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In the last verse of the passage from Isaiah, we heard the prophet proclaim “This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Wouldn’t it be a shame if we missed the party at which the Lord appeared by not being glad and rejoicing? What might be our reward for attending the party? If today’s Gospel passage in Matthew is any indication, we might be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness if we have a wardrobe malfunction or simply aren’t dressed properly. What’s going on here?

Well, like so many aspects of life, it’s complicated.

It is tempting to try to think of this Gospel passage as merely the third parable in which Jesus is completing his critique of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the priests, Pharisees, and the elders. On a literary critique level, we should question whether it is even a parable or an allegory; to which one might respond, does it matter? I do think that the nuance is worth our consideration today. What we actually receive in today’s Gospel lesson is a recounting of salvation history from start to finish. Alpha to Omega. It covers the Old Testament prophets, the king – God – giving a royal banquet for his son – Jesus – the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D., the post-resurrection early church community and the final judgment. These Matthew verses are also starkly different from the comparable story in Luke’s Gospel. What are we to make of all this?

I think that we ought to start by appreciating the subtlety of the literary differences between a parable and an allegory. This is in part a problem that we have brought upon ourselves through modern scholarship. When the gospel was written, the tool of literary criticism was not practiced, so folks in Matthew’s community did not debate the parable versus allegory issue. It was more of an organic step but none-the-less intentionally created. Although it is quite likely that the author of Matthew’s Gospel took a parable spoken by Jesus and reworked it into the allegory that we encounter today.

I hope that you are thinking, what’s the difference? A parable signifies as one single concept that seeks to create or impart new knowledge (Pregeant p. 99). We encountered superb parables a few weeks ago as Jesus went about his public ministry in Galilee. You remember them; the parables about the sower, the mustard seed, the yeast and several additional ones. Each one, in its way, indeed offered us the chance to think in a new way about our faith as followers of Jesus. We were invited by our Lord to be creative and think anew about how we go about deepening our relationships with God and one another.

An allegory, on the other hand, essentially reminds people of what they already know. The challenge with an allegory is for the hearers to go through a process of decoding it. In so doing, we look at each element within and figure out what it points to outside the story. With this particular passage it may come across as a “good news”/“bad news” result. Of course things have changed within Jesus’ story too. He is now in Jerusalem fully engaged with the chief priests, Pharisees and other religious leaders with an outcome looming that we know all too well. This is the third straight week in which Jesus uses a parable or what we should treat as an allegory to set the record straight with his primary antagonists. But obviously we are witnesses to these proceedings too. We are being reminded of some very real truths in the allegory.

Let's do some decoding.

We need not break down every part of each verse. Let's focus on the key points. We may accept that the description of a wedding banquet would ring many familiar bells for any person with a modicum of knowledge of Scripture as such a messianic banquet appears with some regularity. Thus the king – God – has prepared all this for his son – Jesus. Twice the king sends out his slaves to call the invited. The chosen. On the second go round some invitees merely turned to other activities; “one to his farm” and “another to his business.” Yet some of the invitees turned on the slaves mistreating and killing them. I'm going to call a decoding time out here. Let's think about these so called slaves of the king. I need to remind myself that the slaves are actually the prophets of God and other messengers like John the Baptist and Jesus. Remember, we are being told a salvation history by Jesus in this allegory about the wedding banquet.

Next, a very specific moment in that history is pointed to with the clue about the king sending his troops to destroy the murderers and burn their city. This would be the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the troops of the Roman Empire in 70 A.D. The author of Matthew's Gospel recounts Jesus' foretelling this event in this allegory. The unwillingness of the religious leaders of the time to recognize God's presence in Jesus brought about their downfall. God then gives it one final try to get people to the table. In this third invitation effort God sends his slaves to invite everyone far and wide, good and bad. God is no longer seeking the chosen but pretty much every and anyone else. Good and bad. Jew and Gentile. Sinners, prostitutes, the lame. The wedding hall was now filled for the final supper awaiting the return of our Lord. “This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Alas, as we know, there's one more piece to be decoded. The man not wearing a proper garment, lacking a wedding robe. This is a participant in the banquet who perhaps arrived with great enthusiasm but was found lacking in his true preparedness to fully engage in the church. The king has this guest bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness and we are left to deal with the final statement “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Thanks a lot Jesus. I'm here. I am really trying to follow you but if I don't have on the right clothing, I'm going to be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness? Okay maybe I stayed up a little too late these last couple of weeks watching the Yankees plod to their playoff demise when I should have been preparing better for small group Bible study. What is the point, the clue, to be decoded in the way this allegory ends? Since the allegory is referring to the final judgment, I suppose I could defer my own response to gaining admission to the banquet. But I know that I can't. I know that by accepting God's gifts of grace and love in and through his Son our Savior, that I must offer back an appropriate response. Each of our responses to God's call may be different and they may happen individually however this is also about the church community. Then, there is our corporate response to the invitation. I believe this is exactly what Matthew's church community was struggling with as they recounted their situation. And Matthew's community was different from that of Luke's and Mark's and John's. And every other church community since then right on here to the Grace Church community in 2011.

We lost a “prominent spiritual voice” earlier this year when The Reverend Peter Gomes died. He was a Harvard minister, theologian and author who preached here a couple of years ago on Grace Church School Sunday. For me, one of his many significant accomplishments summarized in his obituary was the following quote. “The Bible alone is the most dangerous thing I can think of. You need an ongoing context and a community of interpretation to keep the Bible current and to keep yourself honest.” (NYTimes 3/1/11) We are just such a community of

interpretation. We are not burdened with the anxiety of emerging as a Christian church from a Jewish synagogue. That is the context in which the Gospel of Matthew was written. The final ejection verses serve to underscore the stresses and strains that the Christian community of Matthew faced. They were trying to understand the essence of their religious identity to follow their Messiah. We need only glance over at the comparable passage in Luke's Gospel to appreciate how different their situation was and to think of Peter Gomes' exhortation "to keep the Bible current" today here in our community. To look for our appropriate response to being invited to God's banquet.

In Luke's Gospel the gathering is merely a great dinner not the messianic wedding banquet that Matthew describes. Yes, the host is angry about the original invitees not turning out for the dinner. Yet Luke's community did not have the need to include reference to the Roman destruction of the temple as Matthew's did to emphasize their fraught circumstances. Perhaps the most striking similarity is that in both gospels the banquet/dinner is filled by people good and bad in Matthew's account, and the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame in Luke's account. Indeed, those who rejected Jesus and God's invitation to join in won't taste the meal. It is alright that Matthew turns up the volume in his allegory to remind us of our need to not only be present but also to actively participate.

We receive an especially vivid picture of what it can mean to participate in church life in the epistle of Paul to the Philippians. Obviously Paul wrote his letters to various Christian communities precisely because they were struggling with a range of real issues that impeded their efforts to strive to fulfill their life in Christ both individually and in their common lives together in the churches. In the beginning of the passage that we heard, Paul is urging church leaders, two of whom are women which is most noteworthy – Euodia & Syntyche -, to be of the same mind in the Lord. This is a real life account of contending in a church community. The church leaders are not being asked to capitulate and give up their personal views. They are being encouraged to be Christ-centered and prayerful in their lives together. They are seeking to offer an appropriate response to be able to rejoice in the Lord always.

On an ongoing basis, our Rector invites us to do the same here at Grace Church. In this week's e-newsletter, The Weekly Epistle, Don touched base to ask us to do some homework regarding our church community. We are invited to respond and to participate fully in our shared life in Christ in this congregation. The two particular matters that we are asked to be aware of involve the future of our parish and our diocese. The Rector and Vestry are working hard to serve the mission of the parish with the critical restoration project. We are invited to participate in a brief online survey that will help these church leaders and all of us to understand better how we are called to move forward. The other piece of homework involves the upcoming election of a Bishop Coadjutor for the Diocese of New York. The Grace Church delegation, three clergy and three lay leaders would value input from the parish at large concerning this meaningful event.

These are two particular opportunities to provide your response about being a participant in God's banquet. I truly believe that our community does not need to worry as Matthew's did about "the outer darkness." If we proceed thoughtfully and prayerfully in our life in Christ together we may look ahead with confidence knowing that "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

AMEN