



## Three banquets and a diet of good

What's your favorite one-liner?

Mine is from Alan Oliva, who is a member of a congregation I served in Lincoln. He said, "Four wheel drive may help you go faster, but it won't help you stop faster on icy roads."

There are some one liners that come from movies and have taken on a new life outside of them:

- "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."
- "Go ahead, make my day."

Here are a few I found on the internet that point out a sometimes untemplated truth.

- Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.
- The early bird might get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.
- Nostalgia isn't what it used to be.
- The farther away the future is, the better it looks.

And then there are some from the Bible.

- “My cup overflows.”
- “Many are called but few are chosen.” (Actually, there is a Lutheran translation for that last one. It describe us. It goes like this: “Many are cold, and a few are frozen.”)

In today’s gospel, we have one of those one-liners that point out a reality of the kingdom. It is the concluding statement that Matthew uses to wrap up Jesus’ teaching to the disciples that day. He said, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” As we contemplate that simple sentence we’re going to have to chew on an unexpected twist that challenges our understanding of God.

Now up to this point, Jesus has painted word pictures about the kingdom. He used the enormous bush that grew from a small seed and ended up providing a place of refuge for many, many creatures. He gave his listeners a taste of the kingdom by using a meager lunch to feed a major crowd and ending up with more leftovers than he had at the beginning. And he homed in on the reality that while the kingdom is entrusted to those living in it, that trust is not without expectations—recall the vineyard and the rebellious tenants.

So today’s parable about the blessings of God’s kingdom reminds us to receive them responsibly. God’s beneficence is given to empower us to reflect God’s compassion to those around us.

We start with a wedding banquet to celebrate a joyous family occasion in which the original guests dismiss the invitation. You might think of a “save the date” announcement having been sent out earlier and the host sending his workers out to let everyone know that it’s time to come and celebrate. Everything is ready. The

tables are set, the musicians have arrived, the food is prepared. All that remains is to come to the party! But it seems that literally everyone has ignored the “save the date” notice and can’t or won’t be bothered to join the king and his family.

But the king won’t give up. He sends his servants out to get anyone they can. Don’t let this food go to waste and the musicians have already been paid, at least someone should get to dance, right? The hall is filled, the party is on. Well, except for one guy. He’s just not celebrating. When the king sees this, and here’s the hard part, he asks the man where his party clothes are. And the man just stands there. He’s silent! Not a word. So the king tells his servants to escort him out and prevent him from coming in. Who wants a party pooper to spoil everyone else’s fun?

That ejection from the party, and when we remember Jesus starts this parable with “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son,” is troublesome. Over and over, Jesus has taught that the blessing of God’s kingdom are available to all, given freely, lavishly, without pre-condition. And yet, this man who had been invited gets kicked out.

How do we who take our place in the faith community seriously make sense of this parable? The commentators that I have read this week have taken different approaches. I’ll share a couple, and then leave it up to you to struggle with me. We may not leave today with a “warm fuzzy feeling” but we can continue to work out an understanding that focuses on grace through faith and recognize that our response to God is also important.

One commentator, Raj Nadella, who is an associate professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, said that Matthew may have used this parable more as an allegory that reflected the context of the church of his own time, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. The commentator suggests that we don’t have to use the same interpretive approach and equate the king’s actions with those of God,

and I quote his words directly here, “Equating the king with God potentially attenuates our ability to critically examine the ways rulers treat their subjects as expendables, as did the king to the man who was not properly dressed.” That’s one way to deal with this unexpected twist.

Sharon RInge, a retired professor from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., writes, “Clearly the issue is not the man's clothing, but rather something else about how he presents himself in this ultimate moment. We are left without a list of specific criteria that move a person from the list of the many "called," to that of the few "chosen" (verse 14), but it appears that Matthew envisions further accountability beyond one's initial response of discipleship, our "yes!" to God's invitation to the banquet.” She goes on to cite James 2 and the tension between the understanding that one’s faith can be seen in one’s works or deeds, mainly deeds of justice and compassion. Even though Martin Luther didn’t like it, James made the case that without works, our faith is dead, useless. In other words, our faith in God’s grace is shown in how we live. We might say that the improperly dressed wedding guest wasn’t partying.

The scriptures we read each week are from the Revised Common Lectionary—a set of scriptures that many churches across denominations have developed and read together. While the focus is on the gospel each week, the other scriptures are included to expand our understanding of it. Today’s scriptures include banquets where all people are invited, even one’s enemies in Psalm 23. Blessings are abundant in both Isaiah’s banquet and that of the psalmist. But there is no banquet in Philippians. But there is a contrast that makes us think of the wedding celebration in Matthew.

First Paul urges the Philippian church to “stand firm in the Lord.” This might also be a way of saying stay centered in Jesus and his teaching. The second encouragement Paul shares is to Euodia and Syntyche to “be of the same mind” to

agree on what Jesus taught and expected from disciples. He recognizes their work in spite of their disagreement. He reminds the Philippians that they have struggled beside him and that their names are “in the book of life.”

And the next words Paul gives them are for us, too. As we follow those words we literally “party” in the kingdom. I encourage you to take these words seriously. Look at what you are saying to each other in person and on social media. The follow through on Paul’s words let us live in the kingdom without regret or anxiety. Here they are: rejoice, trust without worry, pray, give thanks, and keep focusing on whatever is consistent with the kingdom, including whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable. Lift up excellence by praising it. Think about all those things that reflect the kingdom, that welcome and include others with compassion. Follow the example of those faithful who have gone before. And as you do those things, the peace of God will be with you.

We live in a time when peace is hard to find. We are divided like Euodia and Syntyche . We are worried about COVID, and our need to limit contact with others leaves us separated. The media by nature focuses on the things we fear. And our leaders, not knowing how to handle a pandemic and wanting to avoid criticism, haven’t found the words that will unite us all. Now, more than ever in our lifetimes, we have to promote the “party” line of the church. Our every word, our every action, every day, must reflect the kingdom where our needs are supplied, all are welcome, and compassion and care for others is the priority. Government can’t do this. That’s not why they are there. But we can. That is the purpose of the Church—to proclaim a different way of living in a world that is hungry for a greater purpose.

We’re at the banquet already. Let’s help others join the party.



There are few things to harvest that don't require planting seeds first. The same is true with our faith. Check out the daily devotional at [GoodSoil.today](http://GoodSoil.today) for a quick reflection on the coming Sunday's scripture and a morning and evening prayer suggestion. You can even subscribe to this blog and the devotion will appear in your inbox every morning. Reflecting on the scriptures during the week helps prepare you for worship on Sunday. Plant something new today.