

October 11, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 22:1–10](#)

TITLE: A Troubling Banquet

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

A question: Is the Bible only for us when things are pleasant and going well, or is scripture also our guide and consolation when times are hard? Think of the wildfires in California and imagine you are a homeowner seated on a charred wall while behind you is the smoking ruins of your house; or imagine you are in Louisiana, standing on a water-soaked porch after your home has been flooded and utterly destroyed. In those moments, can you still read the Bible? Can you still find comfort in its gospel?

The Bible may commonly be read during comfortable Sunday worship services, but its message goes out into a world where there is both joy and sorrow. Reading the Bible are people in burnt or flooded homes. Reading the Bible are people who have just lost a family member or a job, people like you and me literally wounded by their yesterdays and unsure about their tomorrows. That is true today—and it was certainly true back when Matthew was writing his gospel. Matthew was living amid tensions within his own Jewish community between the powerful temple leaders and the upstarts worshiping in house churches. Then in 70 CE, the Romans demolished the city of Jerusalem, destroying its buildings and desecrating its sacred temple. That's the setting for Matthew as he re-tells the gospel story. There in the ruins of a once beautiful capital city, Matthew weeps, frustrated, angry, and writes down today's parable of a troubling wedding banquet.

Scripture speaks to us in both good times and bad, when we're comfortable, safe and in power and when we're troubled, perplexed and persecuted. In all settings it is a life-giving gospel of good news for all. But it needs to be heard honestly, even when its message challenges us and reminds us that there is work to be done between now and the great dawning of the kingdom of heaven.

Once upon a time a great banquet was planned. Invitations went out to gather the community together. Everything was of the finest quality with plenty for all. Yet the invitation was spurned. Over and over again, the messengers calling people to this banquet were given excuses—no, I'm too busy. They were treated poorly—what need have I of this banquet; I am already well-fed. The servants were even beaten, abused, and murdered. There is much in this old story that reflects our own national history.

Tomorrow is a holiday—one that until recently was called Columbus Day, but which we now know as Indigenous People's day. Columbus Day is a fairly recent national holiday, being established only in 1937 by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Columbus himself is a murky figure, who even if he truly was born in Genoa, Italy (which some scholars doubt), there is no question that his primary national identities were Portuguese and Spanish. He married a Portuguese noblewoman and his career was spent in the service of the Spanish queen and king. Even more troubling is his record of combining exploration with exploitation and slavery. On October 12, 1492, Columbus landed on a

Caribbean island. There he encountered the Lucayan people and before the day was over he took six of them as slaves. Columbus later sailed to the island of Hispaniola and began capturing men, women and children as slaves to be sold back in Spain.

Our holiday focus has rightly shifted from Cristoforo Colón, his more appropriate Spanish name, to honoring on this day the Indigenous People of North America. Yet the history of our treatment of Native Americans is just as troubling—a long litany of broken promises, illegal land acquisition, forced cultural assimilation and murder. (As Kelli Booher reminded us,) vibrant Native cultures were treated as enemies and suppressed by a dominating and violent European colonizers, despite the real potential to live, learn, and thrive on a shared continent. Similar to Matthew's allegory, America, a land capable of providing a rich banquet for all, became a nation prone to abusing God's messengers calling for a beloved community and killing those who would challenge the white culture's power.

So back to our parable: What was the response of the Lord of the Banquet to the people's rejection? Well, whether back in the days of Matthew with the city of Jerusalem lying in ruins, or in modern times with attacks on Native peoples and the lingering legacies of slavery, Jim Crow and racism, still a persistent invitation goes out for us to gather at God's wedding banquet. These invitations go out to the highways and byways, proclaiming a banquet prepared for all. Even after times of rejection and destruction, of wildfires and floods, slavery, racism and sin, still a simple message is proclaimed—God's wedding feast is ready. Go into the streets and invite everyone to the wedding banquet so that, by grace, our communities might be healed.

I recently had an argument—no, a theological disagreement—with a Pittsburgh Presbytery colleague. I voted against ordaining a recent candidate for ministry because of his non-inclusive, judgmental theological positions. Only a handful of us voted against him, but my opposition was noted by another minister who wanted to talk to me about my vote. We met and quickly got into a discussion about the nature of sin and how Jesus washes away, is the propitiation, for our sins. To explain his position, my colleague told the following allegory: A man had a front yard that was a beautiful public space for all the neighbors and children to enjoy. But one day, a teenage boy drove his truck through that yard—spinning circles, tearing up the sod, destroying the landscaping. The landowner ordered the boy to repair the damage, but he was young; he had no tools, no expertise and was totally unable to fix the yard. But the property owner's son did have those skills, so he offered to repair all the damage caused by the reckless youth. My colleague concluded by suggesting this was an illustration of how Jesus steps in, repairs the damage, washes away our sin, and restores the relationship between each of us and God.

I listened carefully, but then I offered this rebuttal. Sin is never just an individual act. The young man who thoughtlessly wrecked the yard harmed the community as well. He had likely acted against the wishes of his parents; he'd destroyed a place of beauty meant to be a playground for children and a park for all; he abused his privilege through his reckless driving of a 4-wheel drive vehicle simply because he had the power to do so.

Yes, he offended the landowner, but just as grievous, he wounded and damaged the community. Jesus didn't die and rise from the grave just to wash away one young man's sin. Jesus died and rose again so that our relationship with God and with one another might be healed; that we might become once more a loving community under God; that we might finally sit together at one banquet table.

That's the power of Matthew's short parable. Told to re-issue the wedding banquet invitation, the king's servants did so. They didn't pick and choose. Their work wasn't about saving one boy here, one girl there. Scripture says "*they gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*" All are welcome. Now, how you respond to this invitation also has consequences. If you refuse to step over the threshold to the Lord's party, that's a poor use of your free will. If you enter the banquet hall, but treat all the other guests rudely and claim false privileges, that's disrespectful and a sinful response to your gracious host. The invitation is given to us individually that we might be better communally. An initial act of personal generosity designed to evoke a grateful, common response of kindness, love and faith.

Years ago, Archibald MacLeish said "*Democracy is never a thing done. Democracy is always something that a nation must be doing. What is necessary now is...that democracy become again democracy in action.*" That is certainly true in our current election season. And I would argue that the same idea is true for faith. Faith is not something over and done with—something claimed and then forgotten. Faith is a verb, something in action, something we must be doing as individuals and as communities. At the heart of the gospel is this call to action from God—an invitation for us to come together, good and bad, powerful and powerless—and sit together at the banquet table.

That's why the gospel can be read in so many different settings. Matthew wrote about a banquet table while around him the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. People reassure themselves after wildfires and floods by hearing Jesus' words, "Come, all you who are heavy burdened and I'll give you rest." Americans repent of how the very places we gather for worship are built upon stolen Native lands including our own church, trusting that within that humble acknowledgment is also the hope that we might still find ways, by God's grace, to sit together at one table. The invitation still goes forth. The opportunity to respond, to act, to join together as the body of Christ is very much alive. So be not troubled or afraid. In all times and places, together, let us give thanks to God.

AMEN