

Matthew 21:33-46

[Jesus said to the people:] ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”



⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’?

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

So, there it was. A little over a year ago. In my mailbox one day...my humble...little mailbox in my humble, little community in Fort Pierce, Florida, where I live. Amid all the junk mail...amid the oversized promos to buy three tires get one free...and the “we’ll pay you top dollar for your car” ads...was this envelope. It was easy to identify as something special, because it was unlike any other piece of mail that day, or any other day really.

A large envelope, in heavy stock, parchment paper, with embossed, hand written, gold raised calligraphy letters addressed to The Reverend Gregory Shreaves. That’s me. It even had the smell of lilacs it was so special. You’ve seen them yourselves no doubt...wedding invitations, graduation invitations, and others. But this was all of these, on steroids.

So, thinking it might have been a prank or a joke being played on me...I sort of inconspicuously looked around to see if the pranksters might have been hiding behind

the shrubbery, just waiting for me to open it so they could laugh at the joke being played on me. But nope. No one. So I took it inside, held it up, shook it, and then slowly opened it up.

And inside this hand embossed envelope was another, self-addressed, smaller envelope, with postage already on it, addressed to Her Majesty the Queen. The Queen of England...Queen Elizabeth, even though she had recently died. Now, to be clear, I didn't *really* get an invitation from the queen to attend Charles' coronation...but just play along with me here for the sake of the story.

This envelope...the whole thing...was so...regal, so special, I just couldn't believe that I, a humble pastor in the Lutheran church in Vero Beach, FL, would ever get an invitation to Charles' coronation.

But there it was. I thought maybe it could have been a clerical error or something, but no, it was the real deal. And it read...RSVP. The honor of your company is requested by Her Majesty the Queen, for the coronation of Charles, Prince of Wales, on May 6th, 2023.

And then, oddly enough, I thought of this passage from Matthew's gospel today, about the king's wedding banquet for his son, and how many of those invited came up with excuses not to attend. One had to get back to his farm. Another had to attend to his business matters and couldn't make it.

Luke covers this story as well, and the excuses there included one man being a newly-wed. He didn't want to get yelled at by his new bride. Another had some oxen that needed tending to.

And as I was thinking about it, I thought, "How could anyone NOT want to attend such a regal outing?" Chance of a lifetime. But then...I thought of all the protocol involved. What would I wear so I wouldn't embarrass myself or my congregation? What was expected of me in terms of proper behavior? Where would I sit or stand? To whom should I not try to strike up a conversation? Could I crack a joke in the crowd, or was this group too stuffy for my sense of humor?

And then, I realized why attending such a royal affair might have been more daunting than I thought after all. The expectations placed on me to not mess up would have ended up being more than I could deal with. Would I make a social gaff on a grand scale and be embarrassed on social media for the whole world to see?

And so after a GREAT deal of soul searching...after talking it over with my friends...and family...I just thought it would be too much for me to attend. Instead, I thought I'd just watch it on TV and wonder what might have been.

OK, end of made-up story...but you get point.

Matthew, in our gospel today, is addressing his community...his Jewish community. And of course, the wedding banquet might represent this new community of believers following Jesus. And he's letting them know that now, in Christ, everybody, good and bad, Jew and Gentile alike, are invited to the banquet. Not just the heretofore closed community of the Jew. But everyone.

And they're invited to be baptized into this new identity in Christ. To put on this new garment of Jesus if you will. But with it...with this baptismal entry into this new community, came expectations. You just couldn't come to the banquet and then just coast. Because with this baptism, both literally and figuratively, came a new identity. New expectations of you.

Yes, you were a new creation in Christ. Yes you were born again in the Spirit. But there were expectations that came with it. No longer could you get away with the claim, as Matthew's community did, that you were God's chosen people...and that was enough.

No longer could you just say, "I know the Law of Moses backwards and forward", as his community had done. Now, as an invitee to this heavenly banquet, you actually had to *do* something as a result. Not do something as in doing something to EARN YOUR INVITATION to the banquet, mind you, but doing something BECAUSE you'd been invited to the banquet. Because you'd received this royal invitation to this banquet, there were expectations that came with it.

What expectations you ask? St. Paul lays some of them out in our middle reading today as he encourages this new Christian community to keep the faith. Things like help those who do the work of the gospel, referring to some of the women working with him. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. How badly do we need *that one* in today's violent world? Whatever is honorable, and just, and pure; whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.

If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things you've learned, and received, and heard and seen in me, Paul says. And the peace of God will be with you.

Paul is laying out, if you will, what's expected in this new Christian community. And it's not a prescription for some future time or future life in a world far far away, but for here, and now...in the present. In the community. In the world in which we live.

There were expectations for the coronation ceremony of Charles as King... Shoes shined; coat and tie; you took a bath that morning; you didn't make noise or call attention to yourself. And then, there are expectations of being part of this new Christian community, as people put on the wedding robe, if you will, as baptized people of Jesus Christ. Because when we put on our baptismal garments...getting dressed up for the party that is our Christian community, we not only are expected to speak the gospel, but more importantly, to live it out in our lives.

How, you ask? What's the prescription for us Lutherans to live the gospel out in our lives? How will I know what's expected of me as a Christian and a Lutheran?

Well, I'm glad you asked. And guess where I found the 21st century equivalent of what Paul is prescribing in our Philippians text today. I found it right here...in our good ol' ELW – our red hymnal. Under the rite of *Holy Baptism*.

The Presiding Minister reminds the parents and the entire assembly, that they are entrusted with the following responsibilities...I might add expectations...

To live with them among God's faithful people

To bring them to the Word of God and the holy supper

To teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments

To place in their hands the holy scriptures

And nurture them in faith and prayer so that they may learn to trust God

To proclaim Christ through word and deed

To care for others and the world God made

And to work for peace and justice in all the earth.

These are the expectations for the baptized in Christ. This is what the world COULD look like, and will look like some day, as the Christian community. This heavenly banquet here on earth. Now.

And we do these things NOT because we MUST do them to earn our ticket into the community of faith, but because we respond with joy to do them for what Christ has done for us. Taken on our sin. Forgiven us our trespasses past, present, and future. Who among us couldn't respond with a big Amen, right? Amen!

The Reverend Gregory Shreaves
© October, 2023