

Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Phil 4:1-9; Matt 22:1-14                      The Rev. Linda Spiers  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – Oct 15, 2017      Trinity Episcopal Church

Matthew’s Gospel writer gives us another parable today to ponder—a parable that disturbs. I read this week an argument of Amy-Jill Levine about the wedding banquet and she says, “if this parable doesn’t disturb, there is something askew with our moral compass. Do you think it’s about heaven or hell or final judgment or is it about kings and politics and violence and the absence of justice?”

Amy-Jill Levine is a University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Science in Nashville, Tennessee; affiliated Professor at the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations at Cambridge, and describes herself as a “Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominantly Christian divinity school in the buckle of the Bible Belt.” Deacon Doug Engwall heard Levine speak, was touched by her words, and he gave me a copy of her book entitled *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Her book covers a number of the most familiar parables and only touches lightly on the Wedding Banquet. She is very provocative in her writing about parables in general.

Levine says, “One does not need to worship Jesus as Lord or Savior for the parables to have meaning. The people who first heard him did not, at first, worship him. Yet they paid attention, because for those with ears to hear and some patience to ponder, the parables spoke to their hearts. I do not worship Jesus as Lord and

Savior, but I continue to return to these stories, because they are at the heart of my own Judaism. They challenge, they provoke, they convict, and at the same time they amuse. At each reading, when I think I've got all the details explained, something remains left over, and I have to start again. The parables have provided me countless hours of inspiration, and conversation. They are pearls of Jewish wisdom. If we hear them in their original contexts, and if we avoid the anti-Jewish interpretation that frequently deforms them, they gleam with a shine that cannot be hidden.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the third parable that Jesus told to the Jewish religious leaders in the Temple. The first was the parable of the vineyard owner and his two sons. The second was last week's parable of the vineyard owner and his rebellious tenants. Today continues the theme of judgment. The king sends out his slaves to summons the invited guests who refused to come. He sends out the slaves again, and there is a violent response where the king's slaves are seized, mistreated and killed. The king then sends out troops, destroyed the murderers, and burned the city. The king sends out his slaves one final time to gather all who were not invited originally, and the party begins. The wedding hall was filled with now surprising guests. The king notices someone who is not dressed properly, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” (Matt 22:12). That guest was tossed into outer

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 304-305.

darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

I wonder why the guest singled out was dressed inappropriately. Why is he treated so harshly?

One way of thinking about the parable would be to see the king as God, the bridegroom as Jesus, and the wedding feast as the messianic banquet. Maybe the rejected slaves are the Old Testament Prophets, the first set of invited guests are the Jewish people of Jesus' day, and the second set of invited guests, the ones who come, are surprisingly the gentiles of Jesus' day. This is how one writer learned about this parable growing up—an interpretation that many may have.<sup>2</sup> It was Amy-Jill Levine's teaching about parables that made this writer think differently.

Is that really the kind of God in which we believe—one that would burn a city because invited guests wouldn't come or one that is vengeful? Was the invited guest cast into outer darkness just unable to afford the kind of clothes acceptable for a king's banquet? Does the God in which we believe embrace violence or exclude people in this way?

I think Jesus has a deeper meaning with this parable, and I invite you to enter into the story and look for that. Jesus was a faithful Jew who brought about a new way of living for all. It's interesting to ponder the reading from Isaiah as we wrestle with the challenge of this parable. A portion of Isaiah's text is one that is appointed for funerals and describes a God "who will destroy the shroud that is

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, in "Living the Word," *Christian Century*, September 27, 2017.

cast over all nations...who will swallow up death forever...who will wipe away the tears from all faces...who will take away the disgrace of people...who is a refuge to the poor and needy...a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.” (Isaiah 25: 4, 7-8).

I wonder if Jesus is asking us to ponder more deeply the ways we welcome people into our doors and at this table. How would we treat someone dressed differently or looking differently? How are our hearts changed by those who accept our invitation to come? How are our hearts changed by those who refuse that invitation? The God described in Isaiah is remarkably different from the king in Jesus’ parable. I believe the parable invites us sit deeply with its meaning—to find ourselves, to find the church, to find the world in which we live. What is it saying to you about the kingdom of heaven?