

October 15, Ordinary 28A (Matthew 22:1-14; Isaiah 25:1-9)

## **The parable of the wedding banquet is a horror story.**

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue

If religion is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, argues Amy-Jill Levine, then we should think of Jesus' parables as doing the latter. If we read the parables and find ourselves unsurprised and unchallenged, we haven't read them honestly or well. Jesus was no teller of cozy bedtime stories; his parables are meant to disturb us—to wake us up, shake us out of our complacency, and compel us to ask hard questions about ourselves and about God.

This week's parable of the wedding banquet is no exception. No effort to soften its jagged edges will suffice; it is a harsh, hyperbolic story, steeped in violence. If someone were to make it into a movie, the genre would be horror.

And yet for centuries, Christians—including the very well-meaning ones I grew up with—have attempted to soften this story by flattening it into allegory. In this rendering, the king represents God, the son/bridegroom is Jesus, the wedding feast is the Messianic banquet, the rejected slaves are the Old Testament prophets, and the A-list guests who refuse to attend the wedding are the Jewish people of Jesus' day. The B-listers who come in off the streets to fill the banquet hall are us, the gentiles.

It's a convenient interpretation: we end up snug and cozy, feasting on wine and caviar while the rest of the world burns. At least, as long as we show up at the banquet wearing the right duds. (Acting holy? Speaking the right version of Christianese? Not letting our imperfect insides show?)

This is the interpretation I grew up with, and for a long time I saw no problems with it. In fact, it prevented me from seeing the parable at all—the extremity of its violence or the cartoonish quality of its plot. I mean, really? Guests who would rather commit murder than attend a royal wedding? Platters of fine food that remain fresh

and edible until an army has razed a city to the ground? Partiers who have no choice but to carry on eating and dancing while death and destruction reign just outside? Why was I trying to make this story OK when it isn't?

One serious problem here is the framework of anti-Semitism and Christian triumphalism. Once again, the chosen Jewish people get everything wrong, lose their coveted place on God's A list, and take a backseat to the more faithful and more deserving (gentile) church. But there's also the problem of the story's supposed depiction of God. As Christ followers, do we really believe in a God this petty, vengeful, and hotheaded? A God who burns an entire city to the ground in order to appease his wounded ego? A God who forces people into his house to celebrate his son, whether they're ready to or not, and who casts a guest into "outer darkness" for reasons the guest absolutely can't control?

Obviously, the answer is no. Of course we don't believe in a monstrous God like that. Do we?

I wonder now if Jesus tells this story in such an extreme and offensive way precisely because we do believe in such a God—but we need the help of hyperbole in order to see it. Is it possible that Jesus is offering us a critical description of how God's kingdom is often depicted by God's own followers?

Granted, we don't generally go around professing belief in a God who turns cities into ashes. But do we—consciously or not—present to the world a God who is easily offended, easily displeased, easily dishonored? A God whose holiness rests on the foundation of a righteous and even violent anger? A God whose need to save face finally trumps his own graciousness and hospitality? A God whose invitation to salvation has strings attached?

It's easy enough to say no, we don't. Yet we are surrounded by people who have been victimized by brutal religion, many of them bludgeoned by a "Christian" depiction of a God who is angry, withholding, tyrannical, and perfectionistic. Most of us know people who have experienced the church itself as petty, ungenerous, and judgmental, just as we also know Christians so exclusionary in the practice of their faith that we dare not approach them.

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son," Jesus says by way of introduction to his parable. So OK, let's take him at his word: let's make the comparison between kingdoms. Are our tables open to all

who come, and does our love extend to those who refuse our invitation? Are we willing to extend a welcome to those who come unprepared, unwashed, unkempt? Do we have a secret stake in seeing some people end up in the “outer darkness”? Are we finally known for our impeccable honor, or for our scandalous hospitality?

In this week’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah offers a picture of God that stands in sharp contrast to the king in Jesus’ parable. Isaiah’s God promises to remove the disgrace of his people and “wipe away the tears from all faces.” He is “a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.” He will “swallow up death forever.” What if the church were known for incarnating *this* God on earth? Maybe if we allow ourselves to be afflicted out of our comfortable misconceptions about God, then the God who truly is can use us to bring genuine comfort to the world’s afflicted.