

Sermon for October 12, 2014 (Proper 23, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Romans 16:1-5a, 16-20; Matthew 22:1-14

Know what: we are shaped by our past, but not controlled by it

So what: we are free – right here and now – if we choose to be

Now what: Claim your freedom. Live your new life.

Title: Come to the Wedding Banquet

“I have prepared my dinner...and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet” (Matthew 22: 4).

Is there anyone here this morning who does not enjoy a good wedding?
What’s not to enjoy, right? The celebration of love, the promise of a bright future, the reunion of families and friends, good food and music and dancing.
Weddings are so up-beat and positive and wonderful!

Did any of you wake up early 3 years ago to watch the royal wedding between Kate Middleton and Prince William?

I did! Everyone in my house did. And why not? How often do you get to see a royal wedding?

Well, surprisingly, in today’s parable from the Gospel of Matthew, we are told about a group of people who had no interest whatsoever in attending the prince’s royal wedding!

It’s a familiar story, a parable many of us know, but that does not make it any less troubling. It’s very dark and unsettling and violent.

The interesting thing is that this parable is also found in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas. Each case – in each of these 3 Gospels – is similar, but with a difference in emphasis.

In the Gospel of Thomas, after the wedding invitation is refused, the master sends out his slaves to bring in others to fill the banquet hall, but the master is not angry. He is simply determined to have an excellent wedding reception.

In the Gospel of Luke, the master of the banquet is angry when the wedding invitation is refused, but he does not **act out** on his anger.

Instead, he sends out his slave in order to fill his banquet hall with “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And even more are compelled to enter the party until the hall is entirely full.

Here in Matthew’s Gospel, the basic outline of the story is the same, but the feel of the entire story is radically different.

Here, in this case, not only is the invitation to the royal wedding refused, but the messengers are killed! Ouch.

Think for a second: how unusual is this?

Imagine that you are invited to a royal wedding. You choose not to attend, and so you decide to murder the one who delivers the invitation. Ouch.

This, my friends, is so odd, that right away we have a sign that something unusual is going on in this telling of the parable.

Next, the master of the banquet – in this case, the king – is so enraged by this murder that he decides to wage a war against his initial invitation list – and to burn their city to the ground, just for good measure. Ouch.

And while this war is being waged, the wedding banquet is supposedly ready and waiting.

Finally, the banquet hall is filled with replacement guests.

However, one of them is judged by the king to be dressed inappropriately, so he is bound hand and foot and thrown outside. Ouch.

Do you know what this feels like?

It feels like an angry, violent young man who was abused as a child and has not yet learned any other way to handle adversity. All he knows is violence.

It feels like 10,000 ISIS fighters in Iraq who are so angry about the alleged mistreatment of Muslims around the world, and so disgusted by Western culture, that they declare a holy war in order to take power for themselves by force.

All they know is violence.

The details have been lost in the course of history, but all of the clues that scholars have point to a very difficult and painful experience for Matthew's community.

Like they have been deeply hurt. As if they have known and felt such pain in their conflicts with the Pharisees and Saducees, that secretly – deep down – they really are hoping that God – like this King – will whack those wicked people and burn down their city and confine them to a place where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's what it feels like when I read Matthew's version of this story. But it does not have to be told in this way. There is an alternative.

The man named Bo Cox is an addict. Do you know why?

Well, there is no real answer to the question of why someone becomes addicted, but Bo's father was an alcoholic. And Bo tells stories from his childhood of Christmases when his father was drunk and he watched his family fall apart.

Bo went on to become an alcoholic himself, and then he turned to drugs. All of this led Bo to a life sentence in federal prison in Oklahoma for first-degree murder. Ouch.

No one sets out on a path to spend their lives in prison.

Bo Cox's story could have ended in that way. But do you know what happened?

There in the Joseph Harp Correctional Institution, Bo went to a 12-Step meeting on Christmas Day, even though he wanted more than anything else just to be alone with his own pain and fear.

But he went, and he listened to all of those tough men in that prison share their stories of how much they missed being home at the holidays, and of how afraid they were of their own emotions that they couldn't quite understand or control.

And when they were done talking, those inmates turned down the lights, stood in a circle holding hands, and they sang Silent Night. Thieves, murderers, rapists and addicts – all singing Silent Night with more emotion than you can imagine.

In that circle, Bo Cox experienced the presence of God wash over him. His fear and his anger melted away. And since that Christmas, his life has never been the same. (I Will, With God's Help: A Collection of Meditations, by Bo Cox, Forward Movement, 2014: p.27-30).

He is out of prison now. For the past 20 years, Bo Cox has been writing devotions and meditations in our Forward Day By Day booklets about what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Do you know people who are trapped by their past?
Who are haunted by some painful experience in their life from which they can never seem to escape?

Nearly every violent conflict in the world seems to revolve around this same story. Something happened in the past which one group – one nation or one tribe – cannot forgive. They are bound to that old story which they keep telling themselves over and over again in order to justify their anger and hatred.

Just fill in the blanks with any name you can think of.
It's always the same, but **here's the truth**.

The story does not have to be told in that way. There is an alternative.

Each one of us has been shaped by our past, by our experiences.

Each of our communities has been shaped by our history.

But our past does not determine our future.

At least, it doesn't have to.

If you need another example of how God can set someone free from their past, you only have to look at the apostle Paul!

He was Saul, the violent persecutor of the church. Nurtured in the strict, conservative tradition of the Pharisees, he was trained to distrust the outsiders, the Gentiles. Trained to keep those unclean people away by any means necessary.

And yet he ended his life as Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, the ambassador of the God of peace who seeks to include all people in the great wedding banquet which is the kingdom of heaven.

How does this happen?

How does an addict and a murderer like Bo Cox become transformed into a faithful disciple?

How does an angry and hateful man like Saul become the champion of reconciliation?

This is what happens when human beings discover the freedom of life in Christ.

We are all shaped by our past, by our experiences.

Each of our communities has been shaped by our history.

But our story does not have to end there.

Because the truth is that, in Christ, we are free. We are free.

Can you say that all together with me right now? **“We are free.”**

We are free – IF we choose to accept it.

We are not slaves to our history. Our past does not determine our future!

God determines our future.

And do you know what that future looks like?

You do. We’ve already seen the trailer.

It looks a lot like a wedding banquet. Like a party. Like a real celebration of life and love, and hope. And we are invited. Thanks be to God. Amen.