

Proper 23  
Matthew 22:1-14  
Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Go With Jesus to Where There is Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

By the Rev. Salying Wong

*Once upon a time, in a kingdom not far, far away, but really, really close by, there was a man, a king who had a wedding party for his son. This king was a big man and wanted a big party to show off his big son and the wealth and strength and power of his big, big kingdom. He made his short list of invitees. These were people he rubbed shoulders with; he scratched their backs while they scratched his. But, when he sent out the invitation, they snubbed him. Why? Maybe there was some bad blood between them. Whatever it was, they didn't want to go to his stinkin' party. Some even decided to send the king a message of their disdain for him by killing his messengers. This king became enraged. He was a strongman, a great man, the greatest man on earth. He called his army and he went to war with these elite and slaughtered them and tore down their entire city!*

*But he still wanted his big wedding to show off the wealth and power of his big, big kingdom. He would not be humbled by a little rejection. So, he made a long list, "inviting" everyone he could think of--literally from off the street. Maybe deliver the invitations on the tip of swords. Having heard about what happened to the last batch of invitees who said no, everyone who was "invited" came. Everyone behaved.*

*At the party, the guests all said the food was the best they ever tasted. They said the wine was superior. They dressed in their most beautiful clothes and looked and acted just like everybody else. At least the food was "free", they thought, though they also noticed it didn't satisfy. At least, they could make connections, grease a few palms, get ahead.*

*But someone stepped into the room, not wearing the right clothes. A murmur swept across the party. "He's not like us! He scandalizes us." The king saw how this stranger disrupted the "peace" of his party and he*

*confronted the man. “Friend, where are your wedding clothes? You’re not allowed here!” But the man said nothing. Some at the party agitated against this interruption and wished the king to get rid of him. Some were intrigued by this man with improper attire. The king did not like this disturbance. His kingdom will not tolerate non-conformity and non-capitulations to the norms and mores of his society. So, he called his slaves and they tied and bound this man and threw him into outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew loves this saying. Of the seven times in which this is used in the NT, Matthew uses it six times. He especially likes to summarize the parables with this. It represented his sense of the apocalyptic judgement for those he believed were evil. It had a delicious violence about it, imagining his detractors in outer darkness, weeping and gnashing their teeth. We often think of our writers of the scriptures as “finished products”. But, they are like us, still on the way. Matthew was still on his way to the eschatological vision of Jesus. The eschatological vision of Jesus was one of restoration and peace through his sacrifice on the cross and his defeat of death-dealing violence by his resurrection.

In one commentary I read this: “James Alison, in his book, *Raising Abel*, argues that we need to read the New Testament through the lens of the same conversion that the apostolic group underwent, a conversion that might be named as transforming an apocalyptic imagination into an ‘eschatological imagination.’ And the pivot-point of this difference comes through encountering God as completely nonviolent in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Jesus and the New Testament authors share an affinity with the Jewish apocalyptic in a hope that God is setting things right for those who are oppressed. But that hope was most often still linked with a violent overturning of present regimes. Alison argues that Jesus took the language, images, and hope of the apocalyptic imagination but subverted them from within to be reconstituted around a God who *suffers* our violence as the way of redeeming the world from violence. God paradoxically lets God’s Messiah get expelled from the world’s regimes as the means of launching God’s reign on Easter.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper23a/>

That is, we could interpret from this parable that it is Jesus who arrives at this party without the proper clothes on, not following the rules of engagement. He allows himself to be bound and tied and thrown into outer darkness by his crucifixion. In so doing, he goes to the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. On the cross, he suffers our violence. He also suffers with all who have suffered violence. Even in the outer darkness, God is there.

Imagine you are at the wedding party of this parable. Would you dare to leave the comforts of the wedding party to follow Jesus to the places where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? Would you be willing to put aside the “riches” of the feast? Would you follow Jesus to the places of pain and weep with those who are suffering?

In a recent article by Joan Chittester, famous for her book and the movie made based on it, *Dead Man Walking*, she writes about weeping and gnashing of teeth in our nation. She says, “Weeping and wailing are heard everywhere in the land of milk and honey — the unemployed who want basics they can't have now that COVID-19 has locked them out of work; the sick and the lonely, who are powerless to save themselves from a virus of invisible particles, and fear they will surely die alone; the evicted and the powerless, whose lives are faceless and unrecognized; the privileged and the well-to-do, who have it all and still have nothing that really satisfies; and maybe most of all, our young people, who are looking at their future and seeing only ruination. No work available. Everything they took for granted, gone.”

When there is such suffering, Chittester says, we must weep. She continues:

“Weeping, in fact, may be the best indicator we have of what life is really all about for us. It may be only when we weep that we can come to know best either ourselves or our worlds. What we weep for measures what we are. What we weep over indicates what others may expect of us in life. It was when Jesus wept over Jerusalem that the die was cast, not for crucifixion, but for the blaze of energy and the boldness of stature that spent everything in him to change what, in the end, though it could not be changed, could not be ignored either. Tears, you see, are more than sadness.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittester, National Catholic Register, Oct. 8, 2020

If you've found yourself angry and weeping these days for the pain around you, you are not alone. I don't believe it would be an exaggeration when we see the layers and layers of crisis that have befallen us, that the phrase "outer darkness" doesn't have some echo of resonance. Our weeping tells us what's wrong and our anger can be directed toward transforming what is wrong to the eschatological vision of Jesus. It is through the pain that we arrive at another banqueting table. This one is for those who contest with structures that deal in death.

Come, let us pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Let us weep in the places of pain. Let us do the immense work of real peace-making. Let us move toward the eschatological vision, as described by the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so  
that he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.