

# If loving you is wrong, I don't want to be right

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service October 9, 2011: The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Matthew 22:1-14.*

Every Wednesday morning at 7:45 I lead a Bible study, which focuses on the gospel lesson for the coming Sunday. Composed of a group of intrepid seekers—at least intrepid; some might call them other than that, meeting as they do at 7:45 in the morning—these are not easily discouraged folks. And, yet, their advice to me about preaching on this gospel was to take the day off. It is, they advised, beautiful weather after all; just be gone. But, Bill, alas, having looked farther ahead than I did, beat me to the punch and repaired to the country. Current versus future still has its privileges! In the end, the best my faithful early morning friends could come up with was the advice to preach on the passage from the letter to the Philippians.

But no one preaches on Philippians, or as a sadly under-rehearsed youth reader from another parish I once served announced, "A reading from Paul's letter to the Filipinos." Who knew that Paul wrote a letter to the Pacific islanders?

I read this gospel over and over, aloud and silently; I got out my Greek New Testament, giving it a woefully inadequate whirl, the primary insight being that it has been a long, long time since I studied Greek. It is a hard one in any language.

I know the pitfalls of claiming (or admitting to claim) that Jesus *really* said some of the gospel passages and that others were words put in his mouth. But to understand scripture, including our beloved gospels, I truly believe that such textural and source criticism is simply critical. So I admit taking comfort in the writing of the Jesus seminar and others, who claim that though Jesus probably told some version of this story, the heavy handed allegory placed over the story is almost certainly the work of the early Christian movement and not authentic to Jesus.

The allegory is not hard to follow: the King, whom we are to read as God, concocts a marvelous banquet for his only son, who comes and invites the worthy, whom we are to understand as the people of Israel. But here's the twist: those who would be expected to attend, the Jews, reject the offer, some even killing the messenger. The King, not to be messed with, burns the city, destroys the people who think they are the chosen and invites anyone off the street to the party. And, then, just when we think it can't possibly get any worse, it does. One of the lucky ones invited shows up in the wrong outfit, an allegory for being unworthy, not believing or not doing it correctly. He gets chastised and is expelled into outer darkness where he, along with the others who got it wrong, will spend eternity weeping and grinding their teeth. Now if that isn't a crowd pleaser, I never heard one!

Please hear me say that many, many scholars do not feel that we must twist our minds and hearts somehow to make this sound right. As one of the participants in my bible study on Wednesday said over and over, "There is nothing you can do to make this passage okay." I think that is true, but what I would say to you is that it is okay for it not to be okay. In other words, it is okay for us to admit that the writing reflects the cultural biases and needs of its community of origin, which is precisely what it understandably does. I believe—you believe what you must—that this allegory is Matthew's attempt to accommodate the growing division among the Jews and the new Christians and to show what happens to converts who are not completely committed.

Though the story perplexes and disturbs me, which is to put it mildly, I get the emotions of it. I get what it feels like to have something that I believe is truly wonderful, only to have it considered by others to be worthless and unnoticeable. It feels terrible. Most of us have a recollection of presenting some shatteringly important idea for a thesis or something that is dismissed out of hand by a chairperson or committee. Those who had experienced the life-giving truth of Jesus just could not believe that everyone, and particularly their own people, were refusing to hear the Good News.

I also have to admit that the part about inviting just everybody to the party sort of gets on my nerves. I like witty, smart, interesting people—like all of us—to come to my parties. Somewhere deep inside we want to believe that we are “in” because we are special, because we deserve to be, because we have made the effort to be, because we have done the right thing for God’s sake.

But we are not God and neither were these early communities of Christians from whose lives and stories came the gospels. Sometimes we have to be brave and bold enough to read between the lines of the gospels to hear how God is still speaking to us through the words. In between these lines and in my heart of hearts, I believe that the truth and wideness of Jesus’ message comes through: the banquet of life—a banquet that serves goodness and holiness—has been blown wide open by the love of God. Any desire to tighten access to the banquet, to determine, using our own lives as the measuring sticks, who is qualified to sit at this table and who is not, is to claim something that we have no right to claim. At the very least we are beholden to place such stories in the box in our heads, titled by an old English clergyman, Leslie Weatherhead, “awaiting further light.” That gentle phrase could use some dusting off in the current religious discourse—“awaiting further light” is remarkably free of arrogance.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians—I have now come full circle—has some things to say to these early Christians that are truly worth thinking about. A reminder: Paul wrote in the generation just after Jesus’ death, some thirty years before the writing of Matthew. Paul wrote in a time when the experiences of those who had known Jesus were fresher, less hashed and re-hashed, less calcified. Just at the beginning of these short words, Paul admonishes his readers to “let your gentleness be known to everyone.” It’s remarkable to me that Paul, who could be so haughty and aggressive, wrote such words. Of course, he was writing to himself—as indeed we all do; but he was also writing from the heart of what he believed to be the truth about following Jesus.

Imagine what the church might have been like if his words just on gentleness had been heard and inwardly digested and followed. We church people sadly have not been marked over the years by our gentleness. Paul might just as well have said, “Let your hardness be known to everyone.” In the news this weekend is the account of Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, with 10,000 members, introducing Governor Perry at some values summit. In an obvious jab at Governor Romney, he introduced Perry as the true born again Christian in the race. On a talk show later he made his point quite clear in talking about the religion of Romney: “It (Mormonism) is not Christianity, it is not a branch of Christianity,” Jeffress said, “It is a cult.” Apparently Pastor Jeffress is not awaiting further light on many things.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” wrote Paul., Particularly in the practice of faith, there is no place for arrogance. And, yet, when some preach today on this gospel they will argue that folks like me have gone too soft, too easy, too free with God’s grace, that we have gone overboard on “inclusion” when we should be talking about standards. Using the metaphor of the man who wore the wrong clothes to the banquet, they will argue that some will get in and some won’t. They may be right, and I may be wrong. If so, in all honesty, I don’t want to be right.

Increasingly *for me* certainty is the real enemy of faithfulness. What on earth can be wrong with erring on the side of openness?

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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