Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:1-14
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Around this time last year, I watched a man get shot on live television. Earlier this year, I watched two people get shot while acting with kindness. I watched people that look like me (and more that don't) get dragged away by untrained men with covered faces. I watched as a tree older than my country was felled. I watched the wealthy broadcast their decadence. I watched books get banned by the thousands. I watched my neighbors deny evidence of torture done by our own people against our own people, and I watched their denials turn from justifying cruelty as a necessary evil to embracing cruelty as a necessary good. I watched children cry for their parents in courtrooms, I watched good people weigh who they could afford to stand up for, what was worth risking their safety for, what was worth risking their family's safety for. I watched a politician lie about immigrants eating pets and say he'd be happy to lie again if it furthered his cause. I watched people lap up the lie anyway. I watched trans people bear the weight of society's failings. I watched people reject the advice of scientists in favor of the ramblings of a syphilitic wrecking ball.

I watched allies distance themselves. I watched the erosion of our nation's status. I watched the reality of this nation become a mockery of its founding. I watched the people we entrust with expertise get rejected in favor of vibes. I watched predatory, manipulative, abusive tactics deployed against regular people. I watched distrust replace goodwill, cruelty replace kindness, domination and sadism replace the better angels of our nature. I watched an unslakable thirst for suffering grow at the heart of all this rot. It grows bigger and hungrier, and the only thing that can stave off the hunger a little longer is the pain of those fed to it. And like all things that consume so recklessly, there won't be enough of those we feed to this beast, so we're going to have to decide who to feed it next. And as I watch, the plausible deniability that everything's actually okay convinces many that all those rumors are just rumors, but at some point plausible deniability just becomes denial. With the Statue of Liberty one of our greatest allies sent a signal into the world on our behalf that we strive to be a lighthouse for the downtrodden, and with the plaque at its base, we repeated that invitation: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The Mother of Exiles stands proud. Even when we've fallen short of that New Colossus, we've aspired to embody her. We continue to shine that invitation into the darkness, but that invitation's starting to sound a bit more like bait. But y'all know all that. You know what you've watched. You know what you've seen. And if your head isn't in the sand, you know where this is going.

Before we go any further, today's parable needs some unpacking. It's easy to assume that if Jesus tells a parable, he's telling us how things should be. But not always. Remember that The Kingdom of Heaven is two things at once: it's that fully realized utopia we sure would like to get to, AND it's the not-yet world we live in now. The Kingdom of Heaven is where we do the business of living. So when Jesus says, "the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son," it's easy to assume the story that follows is about God, Jesus, and the people who rejected Jesus' invitation. But that assumption doesn't make sense; you end up with no one interested in Jesus, God burning down cities for the insult, and people only showing up through coercion, and even they're in danger of God's wrath for something they can't help.

This parable makes much more sense if this is an earthly king in the not-fully realized world. This is how things are, not how they should be. People don't reject invitations from beloved kings, but they sure can come up with excuses when he's not liked. And his son must've been a piece of work, too, for no one to consider the favor they'd garner by buttering up the royal family. At the very least, you'd expect some social climbers, but not even they show up. And we quickly understand why he's so disliked when rejections arrive in place of the usual sycophants. The king kills 'em and burns down their city. And when he replaces them with random people off the street, he's furious that one of those last-minute filler guests had the audacity to feast in

anything shy of coat and tails. And for this great offense, the man is bound and cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If that's our model, if that's our God, get me out of these robes and let's close up shop 'cause all that does is reinforce the cruelty we've been watching. That's saying we want your tired, your poor, your huddled masses bound hand and foot and cast into prisons in other countries or camps in our own. If only they'd immigrated the right way; if only they'd worn the right jacket. Oh, we know that kind of god all too well, a false idol king worried only with what he can gain from self-agrandizing, self-enriching abuse. In other words, this isn't the "wouldn't it be great if things were like this" kind of parable; it's the "isn't it awful things are like this" kind. At this banquet, you can chat with your coworkers about the execution you watched last night; you can learn new ways to belittle your enemies; you can toss someone out for wearing the wrong clothes or carrying the wrong papers or carrying the right papers suspiciously or caring how human beings are treated or loving your neighbor or quoting scripture or simply asking what Jesus would do. The goodness I was raised on, flawed though it was, and the moral appeal to that goodness simply doesn't carry the weight it once did. What is true, what is just, what is honorable matters less than the idols cast before our eyes. I've watched as those idols that are so clearly idols've metastasized, consuming goodness and calling the resulting refuse morality.

But I've also watched as good people've pushed back. I've watched impassioned speeches. I've watched communities draw closer. I've watched love and hope slow attacks. I've watched propaganda fail. I've watched you stand in frightening places, and I've watched you feed frightened people. I've watched a lot in this Kingdom, and while it's certainly not where we want to end up, there's much here to remind us of the good that still can be. I've watched you clothe the naked, feed the hungry, defend the oppressed. I've watched you reject idols, I've watched you give when giving's hard, I've watched you sigh at headlines and somehow still find joy with each other. I've watched this banquet, and while one king still threatens with bloviating audacity, another promises there's hope yet in your hearts, kindness yet on your lips, and justice yet at your hands.