

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 15, 2017**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Matthew 22:1-14 (NRSV)**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“It is wise to direct your anger towards problems - not people; to focus your energies on answers - not excuses.”**

- William Arthur Ward, American author (1921-1994)

**“The cross solved our problem by first revealing our real problem, our universal pattern of scapegoating and sacrificing others. The cross exposes forever the scene of our crime.”**

- Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest (b.1943)

from Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life

**Making Excuses**

I was an English major. I love looking at words and comparing versions of stories and ferreting out the meanings of things. And I love *Prairie Home Companion* with Garrison Keillor. But that is beside the point. And I'm not making excuses for putting these two texts in front of you – just explaining my enthusiasm about doing so.

This morning we have two versions of the same story – again. Like last week, we have the Gospel of Matthew written 50 plus years after the murder of Jesus – and we have the Gospel of Thomas written 20 years after the murder. We have two moments and in time – two people writing from their perspective – preserved in permeable language and translated by several groups of people with their own perspectives.

Matthew has transformed the story – in his style – into an allegory. The king is G-d, throwing a banquet for his son (Jesus). The Jewish prophets make excuses and refuse to attend. G-d orders the Roman Emperor (Titus) to send in the troops and destroy Jerusalem (in the year 70 c.e.). And then foreigners (gentiles) are invited to come to the banquet – join the Christian movement.

As an addendum – there is this thing about a wedding robe – something a “passerby” isn't likely to have on him. The allegorical reference here is the “putting on a new life” – Christians are supposed to act a certain way. Those who don't “act Christian” or change their lives – “unfit Christians” will be sorted out by G-d in the final judgment – and thrown into eternal misery.

As an aside, I was traveling in East Timor, Indonesia a few decades ago with UCC missionary friends who have spent their lives there. We were in a translated conversation with an older man in a hilltop village. In Timorese, he talked about people

who “combed their hair” with Christianity. I think this is an apt way to talk about Matthew’s “unfit Christians.” Back to the text.

The last sentence is Matthew’s favorite theme: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” The Jesus Seminar came to the conclusion that somewhere in this allegory is a story Jesus may have told – but this version sure isn’t it. They graded it gray (rather than pink or red).

Thomas – written 30 years earlier, before the destruction of Jerusalem, before the Jesus Movement had all that traction – told a simpler story. A person invited four people over for dinner. All of them make excuses and the person’s slave is instructed to go out and invite people he sees on the street. These random people are not necessarily foreigners or gentiles, they are not necessarily poor or handicapped (as in the Luke version of the story). They are simply people.

The Jesus Seminar rated this portion of the story pink – as very close to a story Jesus might have told. It would have been unusual to have all one’s guests decline at the last minute – and the invitation to random strangers would have defied social convention.

But this version is not graded red – as the seminar felt Thomas, too, had an agenda. All of the invited guests here are people of means – wealthy business men. And he added a conclusion: “Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father.” Thomas had a beef of some kind with financial wheeler-dealers – and banned them from G-d’s presence – replacing them with people of unknown financial status.

It’s interesting that both versions of this story have traction today. Certain Christians love to judge Jews for not seeing that Jesus was the Messiah and not becoming part of the Movement. Their aim is to convert Jews to the true faith. Christians of any number of persuasions love to judge other Christians as being unfit – not believing the right things – not behaving the right way. My favorite, of course, is to claim that racists and LGBTQ haters aren’t Christian – and will be judged by G-d eventually.

And then if we look at our current Administration and Congress – look at the number of wealthy merchants and buyers, the number of Wall Street cronies – and the kind of legislation coming out with its bias for the rich rather than the common good – well I land squarely with Thomas. Jesus, of course, allowed room for Zacchaeus and other financial scammers to repent, find redemption, make their way into alignment with G-d’s kin-dom. But, being human, I like the idea that the UNREPENTANT wealthy hoarders will get it from G-d someday. That’s where I need to grow up and lose my penchant for revenge.

The point of a spiritual life, really, is not necessarily to judge everyone else without looking at oneself. Yes – perceiving injustice and calling people of power to account is

part of the package. But the self needs to be judged and corrected as well. We are responsible for our own actions: for either “combing our hair with Christianity” and wearing the fancy robes and making excuses – or for getting our overalls on and doing the dirty work that Jesus and our Maker have called us to do.

And that dirty work includes giving up our own relative wealth for the common good – and sitting at the table with people of all social strata (not just our own). We are called to stop making excuses and show up when G-d calls us to face difficult and uncomfortable situations.

As someone reminded me yesterday, a healthy spirit and life demands that we put G-d in the center – and stay engaged with the world from that place of stability and love. When we lose our center, anxiety takes over and we start making excuses to hide and hoard. Coming from the G-d inside allows us to see the G-d in everything around us – and make more compassionate – even if uncomfortable or risky – choices.

The quotation I found from William Ward is an excellent reminder:

“It is wise to direct your anger towards problems - not people;  
to focus your energies on answers - not excuses.”

Focus on answers for the problems – what a concept! It means working across the aisle – and, in our case, working with “other kinds of Christians” as well as people of other faiths – toward a mutual solution to problems we all face.

The fires in Northern and Southern California are not partisan – police brutality and mass shootings are not partisan – economic disparity and the need for accessible health care is not partisan. But the solutions tend to be partisan. That’s the hard work – de-partisan-izing solutions.

And I have a lifetime of participation in partisan politics, white privilege, middle-class accessibility to wealth unshared, and liberal self-righteousness to repent of and repair. I remember sitting here with our kids talking about the need to fight our new president – and Grace saying, “Doesn’t G-d love everyone?”

We all have our issues. It’s time for us to deal with them. And then move on to repair the world. Thanks for being allies in the struggle.

## **Matthew 22:1-14 (NRSV)**

1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:

2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.

7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

## **Thomas 64:1-12 (The Five Gospels)**

1 Jesus said, A person was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. 2 The slave went to the first and said to that one, "My master invites you." 3 That one said, "Some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instructions. Please excuse me from dinner." 4 The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master has invited you." 5 That one said to the slave, "I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time." 6 The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." 7 That one said to the slave, "My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner." 8 The slave went to another and said to that one, "My master invites you." 9 That one said to the slave, "I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me." 10 The slave returned and said to his master, "Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused." 11 The master said to his slave, "Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner."

12 *Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father.*