

October 15, 2017
Grace Lutheran Church
Matthew 22:1-14

I've seen it mostly on coffee mugs. I'm confident the phrase can be printed on a multitude of different objects. I've considered getting one for my dad as his sense of humor mirrors my own and I know he'd enjoy it. A plain white coffee mug with bold black lettering confidently proclaiming my deepest admiration and respect for the man who has taught me many things: "World's Okayest Dad."

Okayest – teetering somewhere in the middle between definitely not terrible and not remarkably exceptional – it's a humorous sentiment that, joking aside, really does engender a heart-felt sentiment and genuine esteem. And if one day a mug showed up on my desk here at church with "World's Okayest Preacher" on its side, I honestly can't say I would be mad. I might even let Pastor Lyle borrow it some time.

Irreverence aside, "okay-ness" has been on my mind this week while dwelling with and reflecting on this very difficult parable – the third in a rapid-fire string of tough texts that concludes Jesus' conversation with the chief priests and elders in the temple.

In the first two parables, that of the two sons in the vineyard and the wicked tenants of the vineyard we come to understand that there are some ways in which the religious leaders have acted that Jesus claims is not okay. Ignoring the will of the Father is not okay. Refusing the transformative message of the prophets, not okay. And for goodness sake, killing the son of the vineyard owner is NOT OKAY! But this third parable, a wedding drama more violent than a Game of Thrones episode, changes the focus of what is, or isn't okay. Or least what okay-ness or lack thereof might mean.

If we are to assume for a moment that the wedding banquet refers to the end-time judgement of humankind by God, then the allegory speaks for itself: refusing the king's invitation is not okay and it leads to utter destruction. Perhaps even more disturbing, even if you get in, not being dressed well enough gets you booted right back out the door. If these are the only two options we're all left wondering, "Well, do I get to stay at the banquet?" "Am I okay...enough?"

The parable's stipulations of the king's kingdom party don't seem to immediately align with the portraits of God painted in Isaiah, Psalm 23, OR Philippians. Why the extreme violence paired with funeral shrouds being torn to shreds and grazing in idyllic pastures and peace that passes all understanding?

I don't wish to ignore a treatment of Matthew's context of the struggle his community was facing as an outcast Judeo-Christian sect with little social standing. Or the gospel author's "told you so" attitude regarding the Roman empire's destruction of the Temple not even a decade before his writing. Or a reflection on the hyperbolic tendencies in that very same writing. But it would take a semester of New Testament study to unpack all those things and I'm sure you

would tell me that it is probably not okay to do that in a Sunday morning sermon. Besides, the Bears are on at noon.

So what if instead, we assume for a moment that this parable of the king's wedding banquet is not about the end-times but the now-times? What if the kingdom of heaven about which the parable reflects, is right now? After all, Jesus was fond of saying it is at hand.

And what if we're not meant to base our okay-ness on any one person or group in the parable, that is to say, decide if we are those who reject the invitation or the one who shows up improperly dressed, and rather see the whole parable as a reflection of our whole selves in relationship with the king and the king's banquet? Perhaps then we might be able to see how the parable's king may actually end up being the good Shepherd of Psalm 23 after all.

Regardless of whether we consider ourselves the world's okayest preacher, lawyer, surgeon, administrator, educator, parent, dog-walker, student, or insert-your-career-here, or not, we all too often confuse our vocation with our justification. If I am the absolute best at what I do, I will be okay. I will be loved. I will be right.

That's like those who ignored the king's first invitation and went back to their fields and their businesses – those identities becoming more important than the lavish invitation to free food and drink.

“Our world creates jobs and family situations where our performance is deeply tied to our sense of worth. We want to be the best employees or best parents because that will dictate whether or not we are okay.”¹

We've “earned” our spot at the wedding banquet! The invitation was extended to us. The king announces us worthy to attend. The party is on, but our worth is tied up in other places. The party is not enough.

So the king sets out to destroy those things we allow to define our worth – destroying our human notions that what we have done and built has value when compared to the kingdom of heaven. Ouch.

Similarly, a kingdom of heaven in the here and now calls for a transformation in the way we dress ourselves in the here and now. As long as we choose to wrap ourselves up in hatred, selfishness, narrow mindedness, and pettiness, we cannot respond to the transformative call of Christ through water and Spirit and word and meal. Grace is free, as Bonhoeffer mused, but it is not cheap. Not being dressed in party clothes means we don't get to enjoy the party.

¹ Erick J. Thompson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3443, Accessed 10/13/17.

We cannot and should not excuse or ignore the stern words of judgment in this text. There are ways of responding to God's invitations that are not okay. There are ways of living and being and clothing ourselves throughout everyday activities and everyday life that are not okay.

But even through this harsh and violent parable, we are gifted with great news about God's party: God will never stop issuing the invitation. From the corner office to the corner lot, God invites you and me, the whole world, to the banquet. Every day we are transformed to be people clothed in mercy and love, called to be a light on the hill and salt for the earth, together working for justice and peace here and now.

Definitely not terrible, maybe not remarkably exceptional, but it doesn't matter. God has, is, and will continue to destroy the systems we invent through which we discern our value and makes the boldest claim of all: you are the world's okayest child of God.

And with God, okay has always been good enough.