

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## The Trouble with Allegory

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The church has a long history of getting in trouble with allegories. One of the complaints that Martin Luther leveled against the Catholic Church of his time was the overuse of interpreting scripture via allegory. He wrote of his own struggle with the Medieval methods of biblical interpretation, "It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory. And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

Luther believed and taught that scripture had one sense, the literal or natural sense. Now this is not to say that Luther was a literalist, he was definitely not that! As a brief aside, the heresy of biblical literalism did not gain mainstream popularity until the 18th century. Luther believed that when scripture speaks plainly it should be interpreted plainly, according to the normal use of language. It was based upon this understanding that Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular. He believed that ordinary people could interpret scripture plainly without the need for special training and therefore they should have access to scripture in the everyday language they spoke.

Luther's main method of hermeneutics, that is his method of interpreting scripture, was to utilize what he called the gospel within the gospel. In other words, Luther taught that we are to use scripture to interpret scripture. And the main standard of scripture we are to use is what proclaims Christ? Any scripture that is in line with the values of Jesus, as stated by Jesus, take interpretive precedence over scriptures that do not.

Alright Pastor Jon, that's a nice lesson on church history and biblical interpretation, but what does all of this have to do with the gospel text for today? Well, the most common method of interpreting the parable in our reading today from Matthew 22 is to treat it as an allegory. However, as

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<sup>1</sup> LW 1.283

allegories often do, interpreting this parable as one quickly leads to some theological difficulties.

The most common and traditional way of interpreting this parable allegorically says that the first invitation extended by the king is representative of God sending the prophets to the people of Israel and those prophets being either ignored or attacked (even killed). The second round of invitations then, is meant to represent a broadening of the invitation to the Gentiles and others. But even amongst this group there are some who are not acceptable based upon their attire, specifically their “wedding robe.”

The trouble with the allegorical interpretation of the parable is twofold. First, it follows a Christian supersessionist theology. This theology teaches that Christians have replaced the Jewish people as God’s chosen elect. This borderline heretical theology has been used to justify the mistreatment of the Jewish people for generations. The ELCA, along with most other mainline Protestant churches, reject supersessionism. Episcopal priest Paul Van Buren, in contrast to his mentor Karl Barth, wrote a nonsupersessionist position: "The reality of the Jewish people, fixed in history by the reality of their election, in their faithfulness in spite of their unfaithfulness, is as solid and sure as that of the gentile church."<sup>2</sup>

We must also acknowledge that in the allegorical interpretation of this parable, there are other groups that could be represented. The first round of invitations could have been from John the Baptist, inviting the people of Israel. The second round then is coming from Jesus and the disciples to the people of Israel again, but also to Samaritans and other Gentile groups. And once again, there are certain members of the second group that are also found to be unacceptable.

We find that an allegorical reading of this parable can leave us with more questions than answers. So, let's set aside the allegorical question of who is represented by the two different groups invited to the banquet. Now let's take a quick look at the second issue that arises when we interpret this parable as an allegory. What does the “wedding robe” represent and why is the lack thereof so terrible?

In the various ways this parable has been interpreted as an allegory the “wedding robe” has been understood to represent: faith in Jesus Christ, baptism, good works, salvation, etc. About the only one on that list I'd be willing to even remotely consider would be faith. But even still, I have trouble

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<sup>2</sup> van Buren P. *Probing the Jewish-Christian Reality*. Christian Century. 1981; June 17–24: 665–668.

even with that because of my biggest issue with the allegorical interpretation of this parable. And that has to do with what that interpretation says about God.

In an allegorical interpretation of this parable God would be represented as the king. And I don't know about you, but I am immensely uncomfortable with God burning down an entire city because the elite of that city rejected the king's invitation. I am also uncomfortable with God throwing someone into the "outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" based upon an esoteric "wedding robe."

To circle back around to one of the points I made in the beginning; I am uncomfortable with an allegorical interpretation of this parable because, for me, it fails the "gospel within the gospel" test. Jesus routinely witnesses to a God of love and grace; one who is full of compassion and always ready to forgive us and be reconciled to us. And I have a difficult time reconciling the God that Jesus proclaims with one who would do what the king does in the parable today.

So, what are we to do with this parable from Matthew 22? I wish I had a nice and neat answer for you. But I don't, only more questions. Questions like, does the literary context of this parable affect how we interpret it? What does it mean that this parable comes in the middle of a lengthy back and forth between Jesus and the chief priests regarding authority? Why does this parable lead into a conversation between Jesus and the chief priests regarding paying taxes? Or, who in the parable reminds us most of the God we hear Jesus witness to?

Asking those questions might lead us to a different interpretation of this parable. Is the king rightly exercising his authority? Is there a way to interpret this parable that doesn't lead to the church triumphing over some other group? Who else remains silent in the face of adversarial questioning?

I will acknowledge that it is a stretch, but there are some theologians and commentators who see Christ in the figure of the guest without a "wedding robe." In this allegorical interpretation, the Kingdom of heaven is like a wedding guest who refuses to go along with the priorities and tantrums of a violent king. In this interpretation the parable could almost be a foreshadowing of Christ's passion. After all, at his own trial before the Sanhedrin and before Pontius Pilate, Jesus will largely remain silent until he is thrown into the darkness and despair of Golgotha.

In the end, I don't have a nice and neat interpretation of this parable for you. But I'm happy to ask some questions and wonder aloud with you all. I am

grateful for the opportunity to work together with you as we make meaning out of scripture. In that way this parable provides us with another example of the importance of community. A key point for Martin Luther regarding biblical interpretation, it is a communal act. We need the variety of perspectives and interpretations that come when a community of faith wrestles with scripture together.

So, let's take a minute and share our thoughts with our neighbor. What do you make of this parable? Where do you see Christ in it? How does it proclaim good news to you? Does it? What might this parable be saying to you in this moment in time? We usually have a few moments of silence following the sermon and before the hymn of the day. Today let's have a few moments of conversation instead. Please, turn to your neighbor and wrestle a bit with this parable. Amen.