

Play Fair: *Matthew 22:1-14*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 2, 2018, "R U Kidding Series", Non-Lectionary

Honestly, I don't know what I was thinking, organizing a worship series about the advice we give children, and pairing it with parables from the Gospel according to Matthew. It's been a good Sunday so far! I don't even like football, but I like seeing you in your team colors. Tim and Lori's song was fun! It's been good, and then Matthew got up and told this story.

I had forgotten how dark and curmudgeonly Matthew could be. Where I come from, we call preachers like him "hellfire and brimstone preachers." Matthew's gospel is this way. He'll be telling a normal story, and all the sudden someone is cut into pieces and thrown into the darkness or a pit.

In the upcoming weeks of this *R U Kidding?* series, we will have themes like "Be Kind," "Say Nice Things," and "Mind Your Manners," all lessons ignored by the parable we just read.

What is going on here? The sermon is entitled, "Play Fair," but there's nothin' about this story that's fair.

The scene is a party, but don't expect a good time. Matthew's party-thrower is a King throwing a wedding reception for his son. But the invited guests don't want to come. They don't even have the decency to make up lame excuses. Instead, they mock the King, and (because this is Matthew's gospel) beat the King's messenger to death.

What kind of a despicable king do you have to be to not even earn the courtesy of a pitiful excuse when being turned down by your subjects? How hated is this guy that they so abhor the idea of dining with him that they kill the messengers?

And when the king hears about this, he goes beserk. No one disrespects him like this!

He puts the prime rib and scalloped potatoes under warming lights and sends his army to these formerly-invited guests now murderers, kills them back, and for good measure burns down their towns. Which makes no sense, because he's king of those towns.

But this parable isn't about making sense. The king goes out and invites ordinary people, blue collar workers just getting off for the day, homeless, folks from the nursing home. And these folks go. They may not like the king, but it sounds like a good party. It's a win-win. They get a party, and the king gets to save face by having a full wedding reception.

And just when this king's fragile ego is feeling better, there's one more turn to the story.

As the King is walking around the party, well, stumbling at this point because he's certainly drunk, he sees one guy not in party clothes. One guy--who just got off a 12-hour shift when he got the invitation and has never even been to a wedding reception before. How was he supposed to know what to wear? And the king goes beserk.

"Friend," he says...which, I'm sorry Bible Translators, but that is *not* what he said. More like "Punk" or "Loser." "Who do you think you are?" And how did you get in *my party* without a wedding robe?" The guest is speechless. Terrified. And painfully embarrassed.

"Guards!" the King yells. "Tie this man up and throw him out of here into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

R U kidding? Nothing about this story is fair!

We tell our kids, play fair! (Even when they're playing for our favorite college team.) We say, make sure you invite everyone. Give everyone a turn. Follow the rules. Include everyone.

But then we read stories like this in church and, well, what do we do with this story? Because it's not fair to invite someone off the street, someone who doesn't know the rules of the game, and then throw them into the outer darkness for not being prepared.

And let's just name the unspoken question: Is this story suggesting that *God* is like this king? That God treats us like this? Some say so. You better be prepared! Make sure you got on all the right clothes, right beliefs, right baptism! Or else God's going to throw you into the outer darkness!

But who said the king was God? Not even hellfire and brimstone Matthew makes that leap. The king is not God. God would never act this capricious. So, what is going on?

We may have forgotten at this point, but this is the gospel, which means it's Good News. We're not leaving this parable without finding the good news.

But good news can still jar us. And parables, especially, have a way of waking us up, opening our else to the world, to God, and to ourselves. Parables surprise and expose.

Expose--that's what happens in this story, isn't it? That's why the king reacts the way he does. Because he's been exposed. First, by his subjects who have no respect for him. What kind of a king is treated that way by his subjects? He acts tough, but he's lonely and broken inside. He can't even throw a party for his own son's wedding.

And then, when he finally finds enough strangers to look the part, this one guy risks exposing the whole thing as the shame it is by not being dressed in the right clothes.

But this wedding guest, this guy unprepared for this situation he's been thrown into, he has the same fear, too, doesn't he? Exposure. Being exposed as the imposter he is.

Because he knows the truth--he doesn't belong here. He has no clue which fork to use, and where to stand and what exactly is that food on those big silver trays. He's way out of his league. This is how I feel at a Football game. It's why I wear a "Be Kind" shirt on CyHawk Sunday. I don't have a clue. Thankfully, you don't embarrass me.

But then, right there in front of everyone, the king exposes this guest as the imposter he is. You don't have on the right clothes! You're not in wedding clothes. That isn't a team shirt! Get out of here!

Ever throw a party and wonder if anyone will show up? Ever go to school or work on Monday, and hear about Friday's party that everyone was at but you? Ever show up to a costume party and wonder, just for a moment, if you got the info wrong and you'll be the only one in a costume? Ever stand on stage and forget your lines? Ever work at a job for years, and then be belittled by your new boss, half your age? Ever give up before you even try because, well, you're sure you're going to fail anyway so why bother?

It's like we're on the playground again, the last one picked and the first one left out. We grow up, but it's hard to grow out of that feeling of inadequacy.

We tell our kids to play fair, but this world is not fair, and broken people go around breaking people all the time.

This story is good news, because it exposes things for how they really are. It exposes us for who we really are.

Because, let's be honest. Do we really want things to be fair? If they were fair, would we be invited at all? We don't deserve the things we have. And if others knew who we really were, under all we hide behind, would they even speak to us? Go ahead and throw us into the outer darkness, because that's where we really belong.

But something happens once we're exposed. As an angry king. An unprepared guest. An inadequate parent. A bad friend. An unprepared student. A fool. A fake.

Once exposed, we can step into the light. No more pretenses. No more games. And we can be who we really are, in all our broken inadequacies.

That's when we realize, yeah, we don't deserve to be here. But no one else does either.

I'm still not sure I like this parable. But now, well, now it's for other reasons. Because, if we're reading this story right and, yes, we could have it all wrong. But if we're reading it

right, if God's kingdom is not the kind of kingdom where an unprepared guest gets thrown into darkness, then it doesn't matter if you're prepared or not if you've worn the right clothes or even earned your place.

Now, is *that* fair?

It is not fair. But who ever said God was fair. All of us--we're all imposters. None of us belong. And since we're all imposters, there's no need to keep up the charade any longer. Instead of finding that one guy without a wedding robe, let's all take ours off so we can stop hiding and be ourselves.

And instead of throwing people into the outer darkness, let's go out into it and start pulling people back into the party. Those who were thrown out by angry kings and angry pastors and angry wannabe gods.

Maybe, maybe this parable is good news after all, and God's not an angry king, and you and I don't have to fake it anymore. Because God's throwing a party, and it may not be fair, but everyone is invited, whether they deserve to be or not.

So on the field, play fair, yes. But thanks be to God that when it comes to throwing a party, God breaks every rule, making sure that everyone is welcomed and loved at God's big party.

Thanks be to God. Amen.