

“Shifting the Lineup”

In team sports when coaches think a player or players isn't getting the job done, they don't throw in the towel and give up.

They bench the player or players, shift the lineup, and put in other members of the team.

Although not an exact parallel to this morning's "Parable of the Wedding Banquet," when all of the invited guests refused to attend and some were indeed pretty ugly about it, the king didn't give up.

Instead, the king sent his unpaid laborers back out into the streets to invite anyone and everyone else, both the **“good and bad,”** to attend.

The king “shifted the lineup.”

Jesus tells this parable during the week we Christians call **“holy”** after riding like a king into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Jesus tells this parable after driving the buyers, sellers and moneychangers out of the Temple.

Jesus tells this parable during a week in which he was regularly mixing it up with the chief priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees.

Because we know at the end of the week the chief priests and elders will have conspired with the Roman Governor Pilate to crucify Jesus, it would be easy to interpret this story as a judgment on Jews.

Indeed, it and others have been abused to do so.

But Jesus himself never rejected his Judaism; he instead taught that he came not to replace the Law, but to fulfill it.

Which isn't to say there's not a note of judgment in this parable.

Clearly there is.

At least some of the chief priests and elders, along with at least some of the scribes and Pharisees, have been increasingly feeling threatened by both Jesus' popularity and his flouting and reinterpreting of the Law in order to help and heal people.

As literalist keepers of the Law, these leaders found not only Jesus' teachings and ministry enraging and threatening to both their own beliefs along with through them the hold they had on their people, but also the kinds of people he chose to hang out with – people they considered unclean sinners that no one should be associating with.

This is the third in a series of parables in which Jesus continues turning up the fire of their wrath, and it's working.

In the verse before this parable we're told that the chief priests and Pharisees *"realized that he was speaking about them.*

"They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet."

Our Scriptures are clear that God holds all of our leaders – not just religious, but those in every realm of our earthly lives – to high standards and that there is judgment for those who abuse or neglect or take advantage of the people under their care.

Although the parable definitely ends on a note of judgment, it's overall one about God's grace.

Whether you think the **"king"** is God or Jesus in the parable he's just spent three years inviting primarily but not exclusively his own Jewish people to embrace a Divine vision of love and grace and inclusivity which his disciples will be sent into all the highways and byways and streets of the world to share, baptizing new converts.

Many, but not all, of the Jewish religious leadership have chosen to feel threatened by and have declined Jesus' invitation to embrace the Banquet Table of God's vision of love and grace and inclusivity.

Conversely, most of the people Jesus and his disciples have met in the synagogues and along the dusty desert highways and byways and streets around the Sea of Galilee have joyfully accepted his invitation into the Banquet Table of God's vision of love and grace and inclusivity.

But lest we become puffed up with our own second-string team welcome to the Divine Banquet Table, Jesus' parable contains two caution notes.

The first is that the king's unpaid laborers bring in the “good and bad.”

That isn't further explained in the story, but the invited guests are definitely a mixed company who may or may not be able to recognize who is “good” and who is “bad.”

It's definitely a reminder to check our own tendencies to judge one another and whether those around us are or are not living lives in keeping with God's desires for humanity and life on this earth.

As Scott Hoezee writes in his Center for Excellence in Preaching column, *“There is no question that Jesus exuded grace.*

“There is no question that far from being afraid of him, sinners and those shunned by the religious establishment of the day found Jesus attractive and welcoming.

“And there is no question that salvation is indeed a free gift such that at the end of the cosmic day – as in this parable – more people and not fewer people will come, and a good many of those who end up at the king's banquet table may well be those whom religious types had long ago written off.”

Hoezee concludes, *“There will be surprises. But that’s grace for you.”*

The second caution note from this parable is what sounds to us like a horrible judgment upon the one hapless guest who showed up not wearing a wedding robe.

Come on, Jesus!

If you’re inviting people in off the streets you can’t reasonably expect everyone to know, let alone be able to afford to own and wear the required attire!

I don’t know about Jesus’ audience, but Matthew’s Gospel audience would have known this judgment wasn’t about having the right kind of clothes to attend a king’s wedding banquet.

Matthew’s Gospel audience would have known the judgment was for not wearing one’s baptismal robe to the wedding banquet – which was a literal robe put on after having been baptized naked and then worn for a week to let everyone know the person was now among Jesus’ disciples.

Wearing the robe would have been a visible sign not only of having been baptized, but of having made decisions about how to live out one’s baptism – about how the baptized were serving the meek and mourning and reviled least of these – in God’s created good world.

In his “Living by the Word” *Christian Century* magazine column, Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London Samuel Wells writes, *“Baptism meant not just a ceremony with words and water, but also a new social location and putting the rest of one’s life in jeopardy in order to enjoy being at the wedding banquet.”*

Vicar Wells continues, *“If you weren’t prepared to take steps to show that being at that banquet meant everything to you, then you’d best not be there.”*

Citing Gandhi's much-quoted expression, *"Be the difference you want to see in the world"* Vicar Wells goes on to say it *"may be a cliché, but it takes us close to the heart of the wedding-garment conundrum."*

You, see, writes Vicar Wells, *"Baptism signifies not making a difference, but being made different, being remade, being reshaped in accordance with the difference made by Christ."*

He continues, *"Simply seeking to make a difference in the world without first allowing oneself to be made different may be little more than respectable narcissism."*

He concludes by saying, *"The banquet is for people who know that the question that really matters is, 'Have you been made different? Have you allowed Jesus to make a difference in you?'"*

In our world today during this global pandemic some of the ways we can make a real difference is by wearing masks, physically distancing, and even staying home, hard and uncomfortable as all of those things are.

We do it not for ourselves but for our sisters and brothers and siblings that we may all avoid catching and passing on this terrible virus.

During World War II when people were asked to self-sacrifice in behalf of the nation they did so.

We've had precious little of that kind of self-sacrificing encouragement from at least a segment of religious as well as political leaders during this global pandemic.

I submit it's time to ***"shift the lineup"*** from leaders who abuse or neglect or take advantage of the people under their care to those who have joyfully accepted Jesus invitation into the Banquet Table of God's vision of love and grace and inclusivity and who have embraced his calling to help and heal people of every walk of life.

To God be the glory! Amen.