

Matthew's Miss Manners Moment

In the category of guilty pleasures, I confess to being an avid reader of Miss Manners' column in the Washington Post. Students of etiquette will know that for years, Judith Martin stood as the arbiter of all things polite. Now joined by her children in the endeavor, she reminds us that the purpose of good manners is to help set other people at ease.

I am frequently amazed by the practicality of the advice she dispenses.

For instance, one should not provide an excuse when declining an invitation.

How many evasions and half-truths could I have avoided in my life had I known this from an earlier age!?

But, she counsels, if one is cancelling a previously made commitment, you better offer a really good excuse!

One of the most important points she makes, though, is that the only offense worse than bad manners is pointing out someone's breach of etiquette.

That, she regularly reminds us, can never be considered the right thing to do.

As satisfying as it might seem to be, and we all know those moments when we would like to say something cutting to the line cutter in front of us, or something caustic to the person eating *straight from the buffet*, it is not okay, because good manners are something we alone are responsible for living.

And yet, here in the pages of Matthew's Gospel, and also in Luke's, we have a parable where it appears the cardinal rule of etiquette has been ignored. Not only is the hapless offender publicly taken to task, the end result of being held accountable is to be cast into the outer darkness, where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Such stories, such parables, must surely land in our minds abruptly, harshly.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth may be well and good for a rhetorical flourish, but if we take seriously the words of the Gospel, such words seemingly blow an ill-wind into the culture of grace we take the Gospel to be about.

It seems such a very long way from Matthew 11, where Jesus says such words as, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

There are moments when such measures of lavish grace come upon us as refreshingly as that first breath of cold air upon exiting the stuffy confines of an overheated living room after the thanksgiving feast.

To have labored long, unnoticed, unsure if our efforts are in vain, unclear if what we *think* is the most important thing is *in fact* the most important thing, to receive under such circumstances the assurance that God has acted for us, that what Jesus did for humankind is sufficient for all that is needed... to hear *then* that the burden is easy and the yoke is light, is to be offered *rest* when *rest is most needed*.

BUT – rest is not always what humankind most *needs*.

Too often, I fear, such words of rest come not when we have labored long, but when we have not yet labored.

To hear such words then is not to receive *rest*, but instead to be confirmed in the notion that *nothing really matters*.

Such assurances *then* could usher us into nihilistic fatalism, such as we encounter when we hear that most people now believe that climate change is real, and yet feel there is nothing to be done about it. Or to think that a word of resistance is futile in the face of creeping institutional antisemitism. Or when we decry the degradation of civil discourse, but hew to our own favorite opinions as though feeling fervently is as worthwhile as judging rightly.

Sometimes the gracious word is the one that offers us work.

That is where the grace of God comes to us from the outer darkness; in the assurance that there are things worth sticking up for, things worth fighting for.

Sometimes, the wedding clothes really do matter.

We are not speaking of color-themed ceremonies. I recently heard of a wedding where bouncers were in the narthex of the church to turn away anyone who failed to heed the instructions on the invitation!

I'm not sure Miss Manners would approve.

But Matthew's Miss Manners moment runs to things more profound than the color of the garment.

This parable gets at the heart of what it is to *be* a Christian, not merely to believe certain key doctrines but to live into the fullness of what it means to *be* in Jesus Christ: to be freed from sin, to be freed to return to our humanity, wherein we remember that, made in God's image, God calls us to join with God in a new world.

Such an invitation would have been a concern of great urgency for Matthew's congregation. If you are familiar with Luke's version of the parable of the great banquet, it still represents a visceral reaction to a rejection of an invitation, but it is less harsh in its presentation. No armies are sent out to kill in Luke, no homes are destroyed, no one is cast into the outer darkness.

The difference in presentation of the parable may well come down to the difference in the intended audience of the Gospels. Whereas Luke wrote for a Greek audience, Matthew wrote

for a Jewish audience, in and around Jerusalem. Where Luke's audience might well be insulated from the trauma visited upon Jerusalem by the Roman army, Matthew's audience would have had a front-row seat to the destruction rained down on his people.

When identity is at stake, as it surely was as Matthew's congregation inched their way out of the synagogue into the church, a certain urgency is injected into the narrative.

So, in Matthew's Gospel, this parable of the great banquet is classically understood as an *allegory*. Allegory, like apocalyptic, disrupts our bedtime reading and invites us to look closer at the characters and the story.

Matthew's audience would immediately have known who everyone was in the story, and so can we, with minimal imagination: The king is God, Jesus is the son, the marriage feast is the culmination of human history at the end of time. The slaves are the prophets, the original guests were Israel, and the substitute guests are the church.

If the parable simply stopped there, it would give us insight into how Matthew's church understood how God calls people, but it wouldn't necessarily inject urgency into how we see ourselves in the reign of Christ.

But it doesn't stop there. The king, surveying those who have been compelled into the banquet hall, trains his eye on one hapless guest.

We have all seen the guest at the wedding who goes on eating, smacking and chewing loudly through the toasts, the overserved oaf who walks between the photographer and the bride and groom as the cake is cut.

But Matthew's Miss Manners moment isn't about a breach of etiquette, as egregious as the guest's attire may seem.

No, it is about a fundamental failure of understanding.

Tom Long writes, "Sure, the spotlighted guest in the parable was pressed in off the street unexpectedly and was probably wearing cutoffs and clodhoppers, but, when he got inside, only a fool would fail to see the difference between what he wore and where he was. He was in the banquet hall of the king; he was at the wedding feast for the royal son. The table was set with the finest food; the best wine flowed from regal chalices. He is the recipient of massive grace. Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? Where is his regard for generosity?"¹

The church must always guard against the incursion of cheap grace into our common life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer defines it thusly, "Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to the idea is held to be itself sufficient to secure the remission of sins... Cheap grace means the justification of the sin without the

¹ Tom Long, *Matthew*, in *Westminster Bible Companion*. (W/JKP, London, 1997) p247-248

justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before.”²

There is a big difference between free grace and cheap grace. Free grace is what God deals in – we cannot earn it, merit it, or escape it. Cheap grace is its opposite; it can be traded for favors, it can be held conditionally, it can be used to reduce human faith to nothing more than a sentence of assent. Free grace and cheap grace are nothing alike. Unlike free grace which offers us transformation and redemption, cheap grace has no value. It changes nothing. It moves nothing. It is *worthless*.

Tom concludes, “To come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not to conform one’s life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar.”³

The preacher must always be on guard against the incursion of cheap grace into their sermon, because the Christian must always be on guard against the incursion of cheap grace into their *life*.

As direct as the warning in this allegory is, it is nonetheless a text filled with hope, because one does not warn against that which is inevitable. If cheap grace would plunge us into an outer darkness bereft of the warmth of a life of hope and meaning, the gracious mercy of God promises instead forgiveness and redemption, and of course, this parable is not the end of the Gospel.

No, the penultimate move in the story of grace is a cross, where the Son himself goes into the outer darkness of degradation and alienation. *And that is not the end.*

The end is life; the end is hope. The end is resurrection.

There are an infinite number of directions we can go from here. If we were a book club, we could cut straight to the discussion questions. If this were an NPR fundraiser, we’d open our phone-banks for your secure pledge or direct you to a QR code. If this were a country club, we’d invite you to find a sponsor and submit an application.

But we are none of these things. We are the church of Jesus Christ, the recipients of the free grace of God, and that means that there is but one way to for us to go: To do the *work of the Gospel*. There remains only this: To be so immersed in the wonder of God’s grace that deeds of generosity spring from our hands, and words of kindness spring from our lips, and our whole lives proclaim, *how great thou art!*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship. (MacMillan, NY, 1957) p37

³ Long, p248.