

There's a lot about this parable that isn't all that fun. People turning their back on God, a city burned to nothing, a man tossed into the outer darkness. It's not the most flattering view of God, is it? This is a tough one. Sometimes Jesus' parables are the easiest things in the world. You just read 'em, make sense of 'em, pat yourself on the back, and call it a day. Notoriously, parables are rarely that easy. Turns out parables have a lot of meaning packed in their short lines, and that meaning's often obscured. That's kinda the point. I can read a parable today and feel pretty good about where the words take me. But tomorrow, reading the same parable the same way might not do it for me. These little stories aren't meant to have easy answers. They're meant to push on our faith and keep us from becoming complacent. Now, the word parable means "juxtapose," or sometimes "putting two things alongside each other." "Parable" doesn't always mean putting two like things alongside each other. Parables compare and they contrast. It's rarely clear the precise meaning Jesus wants us to take away. And that's the point. Take this murky thing and live with it, watch it change, let it rattle around anew again and again.

Actually, the word for parable has another layer that's helpful, too. It's not always about obscuring the meaning. There's also a maritime significance: it described two ships pulled alongside each other going to battle. Think about that for a second. Instead of a parable saying "these two things are alike," sometimes a parable says, "these two things are at each other's throats." If we read this parable that way, there's a way out of dealing with it that part of me really likes. If this parable is a set of ideas at each other's throats, battling it out like two great ships, maybe it goes like this: The Kingdom of Heaven is on one side, and the king who gave a banquet is on the other. He invites everyone, no one shows up, he gets mad and burns a city to the ground. Then, he settles for the remnant and gets mad again when someone has the nerve not to dress up, and kicks 'em out. Two ships: harsh treatment of servants and the poor on one side, the mercy of God unspoken but present on the other.

I mean look. I like that, I like how simple it becomes if you just put the words at odds with each other. I mean, this week I like it. But I wonder if I'm trying a little too hard to get out of the work of the parable. 'Cause when I find a parable easy to understand, I get nervous. Parables are funny things, ya know? We've got this three-year cycle of readings which means we return to the same passages, and every time we come back, the words on the page are the same, but we're different. If we're honest with ourselves, the meaning of a parable doesn't stay put. It shifts around as the world shifts, moves alongside whatever our hearts and minds carry. Sometimes I hear an explanation for a parable I like so much that I can't hear other approaches, and that's not great. Parables are meant to be approached differently. In other words, if I have a particular meaning I really like, I should get suspicious of the complacency it offers. So, instead of telling you exactly what this parable means (which I couldn't do anyway), why don't we look at a few ideas of what it could mean, a sort of primer. How To Read Parables 101.

The first rule of parables is you don't talk about parables. I mean, it kinda is. Parables didn't just obscure their meaning from the folks trying to understand them. Parables could be a sort of code to talk about today's issues in a way that our rulers can't catch the real meaning. We've got lots of lines pointing to this, especially the idea of "those who have eyes to see and ears to hear." It's not literal. It's a wink-wink, nudge-nudge. Think about something like Animal Farm. Those in power might not catch the deeper meaning, and those telling the story can claim plausible deniability: It's just a book about a weird farm, what harm could it do? With that in mind, there's this wedding banquet, see. It could be the case that the wedding banquet is actually a wedding banquet, but we're in a parable, so probably not. The parable pulls the Kingdom of Heaven alongside the

Wedding Banquet. You can read that as a comparison or a juxtaposition, ships leveling their canons and ready to fire. But however you read it, it gets real complicated real fast.

Once you accept that nothing is as it seems, you gotta identify the characters. This is just as tricky, because we're still in that obscured place. The Kingdom of Heaven is a good thing, and we're tempted to say that the leader in a parable is God. If it's a king or a ruler or a landowner, it often is, but not always and not strictly. This king could be God showing us how God would act. If that's the case, there're probably some hard lessons in today's reading. But it's just as likely that you could read this king as antithetical to how God would act. And if that's the case, we end up somewhere very different.

God welcomes us all to the banquet and then gets mad at those that aren't prepared.

OR

An earthly king's got a real short temper.

There's other ways to come at these characters, but we're gonna keep trucking. What about the destruction of the city? Could be the parable references Babylon razing Jerusalem 6 centuries earlier. It could also be about Rome razing Jerusalem a few years earlier. Either work. Actually, they can both work at the same time. Or maybe it's not about either of 'em.

And then there's the wedding robe that only one person isn't wearing. Folks have taken this detail roughly a metric million different ways. Is the robe a literal robe, and the king (who may or may not be God), the king's mad that this person whose entire city just got destroyed couldn't be bothered to go home and change? Or, is the person demonstrating a high degree of faith? While everyone else went home to change first, they rushed straight to the party! There're a couple of commentators that suggest an old custom where the father of the groom provided every guest with one of those robes, which ensured that everyone dressed well but no one dressed better than anyone else. Not wearing the robe would've been a rejection of the father's gift. It would've been an insult to tradition. It also meant everyone could see the rags they wore OR they saw an ostentatious display of fashion and wealth.

Or maybe the robe's not literal. Maybe it stands for something else? Maybe the robe signifies baptism and a certain way of being? Maybe the robe is a kind of readiness to go with God? Maybe it's a sign of belonging? Maybe the King is God, and the wedding banquet is the Kingdom of Heaven, and the city is the way things are, and open invitation is how things will be, and the robe is a life promised to Christ, and the one who refuses to wear it is a hypocrite ready to mooch off the buffet without doing any hard work.

OR

Maybe the King is the Emperor, and the wedding banquet is the Pax Romana, and the people don't trust the conquerors, and the city represents all they love which gets destroyed, and the Romans'll kick out anyone that doesn't fall in line. And all that pulls alongside, is juxtaposed with the Kingdom of God, where no such coercion rules.

OR

Maybe it's something else altogether. And it will be something else altogether the next time we read it, and the next, and the next.

There's also something to the ending that's tricky to me, the bit about many are called and few are chosen. Elsewhere, we know God sends us out to do impossible things "like sheep among wolves." Just by showing up at the banquet, there's things expected of us Christians. Maybe we get toseed out if we don't live right, but I don't buy that. At least not today. The rest of Jesus' message doesn't jive with that. We get more chances than we could ever deserve. Where my brain goes is that, when we show up for that banquet, we're fed, sustained to do the work we're called to. And that means we've gotta leave the comfort of this place to get that

work going. It will be sacred, it will be holy, and it will be hard. Maybe that's the outer darkness. Maybe the Christian Life requires so much of us that, at times, it's utterly demanding.

Maybe.

I wonder, too, about the other guests at the banquet. Seemingly no one thought to help the non-robed guest. No one tried to intervene, no one gave their own robe, no one even saw. So I wonder if there's an unspoken piece there, too. What kind of responsibility do we bear for our fellow banquet guests? They're gonna do what they're gonna do, but maybe we have a responsibility to offer a hand, to teach, to show.

All that to say, there're a bunch of ways to read parables. I don't think there are right ways. There's probably some wrong ones, but maybe not. The truth is, I don't know. And I think that's beautiful. The ambiguity of parables makes me think there's room for ambiguity elsewhere. Many things can be true at the same time. Answers can be complicated. Life can be messy, and we can move through it clumsily. What matters is that we move through life faithfully. Whether it's reading scripture, serving meals, trying to make sense of the news, and loving neighbors, what matters is that we do it faithfully.