

Hope Shines in the Darkness [OR Christ's Compassion Knows No Bounds]

Matthew 22:1-14 and Psalm 23

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on October 15, 2023

Even in the age of AI, desperate students still have CliffsNotes that boil down long, sometimes tedious, novels into a few main points that can be used to write essays...or, as many a desperate student tells their parents, to better understand the story while reading said tedious novel. I was afraid to use them for fear of getting caught by teachers way smarter than my high school self. But, there is a valid argument for boiling down difficult ideas to make them more accessible. Here's my attempt at the CliffsNotes version of Jesus' parable of the Wedding Banquet in today's reading from Matthew's gospel:

The kingdom of heaven is like the guy who saw the king's petty and rageful true self and wouldn't put on the king's robe, which led to the king throwing that guy into the outer darkness. [Read that twice for good measure.]

This CliffsNotes version of Jesus' parable makes perfect sense. Why on earth would you want to party with a king who lacks self-control and rages against his people when his ego is bruised? He invited party guests who didn't want to come, so much so that they killed the king's messengers. The king's rage turned on them and he torched their cities. This is not a king of grace, mercy, or kindness. This king lets you know how much you've disappointed him by killing you and burning your house down. I wouldn't want to wear that king's robe either. At least, I hope I would have the courage not to put on the robe but I don't think I'm that brave.

Growing up in a fundamentalist Christian church, I often heard Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet interpreted as if the rageful king was God and the last people invited who wore the king's robes were the baptized and the poor robeless guy was thrown into the outer darkness to suffer for all of eternity for not putting on the dang robe. As Pastor Gail has emphasized over the last two weeks, we need to be really careful with Jesus' parables, especially these last three from the last three Sundays. Jesus' told these three parables after he entered Jerusalem towards his execution on a cross. Time was of the essence and he was being challenged by religious leaders who wanted him dead. Parables don't lend themselves to easy interpretations and, as listeners, we often want to align ourselves with the characters that we think are the winners. Who doesn't want to

win when it comes to God choosing you or not choosing you – especially if eternal outer darkness has anything to do it.

Let's break down the story unfolding around this parable. Jesus entered Jerusalem where he made angry religious leaders even more angry. The religious leaders arrested Jesus, took him outside the city limits to be crucified, stretched out on a cross until he was dead. It's more than possible that the guy who gets thrown into the outer darkness was a story that Jesus was telling about himself because his message of absurd hope, extravagant grace, and expansive love was just too much for the powers that be. The wedding banquet echoes the crucifixion, both ending with the outer darkness. The king, the one in power, threw a fit when his party went awry. The king doesn't align with the God who Jesus reveals. God is revealed at the end of the gospel of Matthew with a crucified king. "Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'"¹ There was no Holy War outside the city walls to save Jesus from death. Instead, "darkness came over the whole land."²

As Christians, there are ways we say that God is revealed to us. First and foremost, "through Jesus Christ, and him crucified."³ We'll also argue that God is visible through creation – the world and the wider universe a signature of the creator. But that first one, through Christ crucified, is important because we argue that God absorbs human violence, putting an end to violence as a solution to what ails humanity. Violence is not a solution. The cross is a shining example of the lost cause of violence and the darkness it perpetuates. Violence begets violence.

Violence replicates itself best, especially among humans. We struggle with the lesson of violence over and over again as we say things that hurt people or sometimes we actually hit people. Violence on the world stage is something we're more than familiar with given Russia's attack on Ukraine and Ukraine's military defense against Russia. And again this week watching Hamas' attack Israeli civilians and Israel's military strike back. These cycles of violence are not just weeks or decades old. They're centuries, even millennia old. People much smarter than me have made plenty of public comments regarding these violent conflicts. Those of us on the sidelines of them are often overwhelmed by compassion.

¹ Matthew 27:37

² Matthew 27:45

³ 1 Corinthians 2:2

Compassion means “to suffer together.”⁴ We see people killed, bombs exploding, and buildings falling, and are moved by compassion, wanting to do something to alleviate the suffering and failing not because of lack of desire but because the problems are enormous, and the darkness is deep.

The news of the world is too much for most of us and especially for those of us who struggle with mental illness. News can serve as a tipping point into deep darkness especially when a compassionate urge to help is thwarted by a large-scale event. We’re not wired to manage the sensory overload from next door and around the world constantly pumped through our phones, computers, and TVs. Reminding each other to unplug from time-to-time, to recharge with quieter experiences and messages of hope is critically important. Today is one such message of hope. During the song after the sermon, we’ll light candles as we shine light into the darkness of mental illness. We’ll pray for those of us who struggle with mental illness and those people we love who struggle with mental illness. While faith can be a comfort, faith doesn’t prevent suffering. Our E4 Ministry for mental health is helping us learn to be a church that meets the suffering of mental illness with compassion and hope. When you come up and light a candle, you’re invited to take one of the smooth stones that says hope or compassion. You can hold the stone as a prayer when you’ve run out of words to pray.

Jesus knows the suffering in the outer darkness which means that Jesus has compassion for our own deep darkness and gives us a future with hope. Lutheran Christianity describes this as the Theology of the Cross. The Theology of the Cross means that there is nowhere that God is more available, more present, more loving than in our suffering, in our experience of darkness. Our ancient Jewish cousins in the faith knew this too in Psalm 23. We sang together, “Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me.” The valley of the shadow of death is more directly translated as deep darkness. God has always been in the darkness with God’s people. Jesus Christ expanded God’s promise of presence, of hope and compassion, to include the world that God loves. When we bear persistent pain, Christ’s compassion knows no bounds. Thanks be to God, and amen.

⁴ Greater Good Magazine: Science Based Insights for a Meaningful Life. [Compassion Definition | What Is Compassion \(berkeley.edu\)](#)

