

So... this parable is a lot. It is found also in the Gospel of Luke and sayings Gospel of Thomas, although neither are as violent as this one. The writer of Matthew takes a lot of the stories to their extreme, and ends them in hyperbole. They are designed to shock, surprise, or change our perspective. They are told in a way to resemble the world we know but be completely different. What is also true, is that they were written in a time and place and they were told in a time and a place and sometimes it matters that those 2 things are not the same. So, this is a story meant to prove some points, and those points might look different over the generations.

A short 350ish-year history lesson.

In the year 380, Emperor Theodosius proclaimed making Nicene Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire resulting in 2 things: any non-Nicene Christian community heretical, therefore illegal, and their property could be seized by the Empire. And it bound Christianity and the Roman Empire together, work that was started in 313 by the emperor Constantine with the edict of Milan making Christianity legal.

The oldest fragment that we have of the Gospel of Matthew is from about the year 200. And smarter people than me take the distance from the assumed location of the original writing to where they found the fragment, and how long it takes a writing to go from just writing to sacred enough to store, and concluded that the first writing of the Gospel about a 100 to 150 years earlier.

So most Biblical scholars place the 1st writing of the gospel of Matthew between the years of 70 and 110. And while the 110 is a squishy date, that year 70 is firm. On August 30th 70, Rome broke through the Jewish barricade, marched into the city of Jerusalem, and set fire to the temple. It did not take long for Rome to capture the rest of the city, and by 73 had completely conquered and controlled the formerly semi-autonomous vassel state of Judea.

I wondered, what would be the equivalent of the destruction of the temple for a modern religion? Would it be the destruction of the Vatican? The Vatican is important but worship is not centralized and it's not seen as the sole or primary home of God. That was the destruction of the temple. It was where the worship, the sacrifices, the place where they met God. Even those who lived outside of Judea, a pilgrimage for Holy Days was planned, or hoped for, or assumed. And then it was gone. The leadership was in chaos and the people were terrified. And everyone had a different idea of what they ought to do next, who they were going to be without the temple, how they would survive as a people and a faith.

And part of this conversation, this debate, is argument were the followers of the way of Jesus, who were both Jewish and Gentile. They, too, had their own ideas of how to live in community now. In the earliest days of Jesus following, they were part of Judaism. Over time there were more distinctions, and then the

destruction of the temple, and the Jewish communities probably did what we would do, what we have seen happen again and again in the face of fear, they probably dug in. The followers of Jesus weren't lining up with what the leading voices had decided and the followers of Jesus were pushed out of the synagogues and the Jewish communities.

Imagine the hurt, and the pain, and the grief of the community for whom this gospel was 1st written down. They had been pushed out of their community, out of where they had been home, and had family. The world was scary and violent and falling apart, and then they lost their place. I imagine the stories they told had a bit of an edge, maybe even some violence.

Back to the timeline, Jesus was killed around the year 30. Because this parable shows up in multiple places, it was probably something he actually said. Matthew sets this story up by telling us that Jesus is teaching, debating, discussing, and arguing with the religious leaders in the temple. We're told he was telling parables that made the religious leaders think that Jesus was talking about them and a negative way and they wanted to kill him but they were afraid of the crowds. That is to say, there was a distinction between our religious leadership and the crowds, everyone else, all of whom were Jewish. This distinction matters, because the people, the crowds, suffered under the oppression of the Roman Empire, and the leadership had in many ways aligned themselves with Rome for their survival, their power, and if we give them the benefit of the doubt, for the survival of their people.

We begin and end of timeline with that bookend.

It matters that this story was told in a time when the religious leadership was aligned with Rome. And it matters that it was told after the Temple lay in ruins. It would have been retold again and again and passed on and then told through the lens of the community's experiences and history. It doesn't make them less true, but I imagine that the way you, or many, spoke of the Vietnam war in 1960s is very different than the way you would speak of it today given history, experience, and more information.

And then Jesus told them this story. The story that might remind them that it was the wealthy and the powerful that killed the prophets. That they did not accept God's invitation to live in the way that the God had commanded them, the law, that is to care for the widow and the orphan And the immigrant and the poor.

This parable is so violent because their world was so violent. And because the parable is so violent, it has been read into violent ways, often about Jewish rejecting Jesus and then play it out, and the way some use power and violence to play out what they think God wants. And I don't believe that's how Jesus intended it, because Jesus was teaching it explicitly to the crowds. And I don't believe that it

is how the Gospel writer intended it, because the people had all suffered under Rome and those who aligned themselves with the Empire.

We're reading a story that lives somewhere between when Jesus first told it and when it was written down, between Jesus calling the disciples and the new communities after the fall of the temple. It was for this community of people living in the in-between, learning to respond to all this change, responding to the leaders who lined themselves up with the powers and the people who were oppressed by the powers. This first community was persecuted, abused, rejected, and marginalized and we are not the same as that community. We don't know what it is to function outside of the power structures.

...but

It does seem like the church universal is trying to decide who it is, lines are being drawn, communities are digging in, and folks are being removed. This discerning and sorting, well, that seems very much like the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus told them a parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like: the powerful, the economic leaders, those who have means and resources, are too busy to accept the invitation. They would rather destroy those who call attention to the places in the world that need restoration, to the people who need justice, than accept an invitation to be in community.

The kingdom of heaven is like: the outcasts and the marginalized, the ones everyone else has forgotten and has written off, the ones that might not be legal, who fall outside of the clear distinctions and definitions, who live or love differently, who struggle to make it through the day and might live on the edge of life are welcomed in. The kingdom of heaven is like this: each is made safe, finds a home, builds a family.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: when all those who didn't have anywhere else to go find a home, when those who had lived alone have been welcomed into a family, when those who were told by those with power whether societal power or personal; the kingdom of heaven is like this: when those who were told they were not enough or that they were wrong or that they were a mistake are named beloved children of God, precious, chosen, called.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: all are invited to live into the fullness of who they are and into the fullness of life in Christ. Each person is invited to be salt and light, to season and shine. It is a place where we are invited to live the life of righteousness, dare I say, to put on righteousness, to dress in the clothes of righteousness and love, kindness and compassion, generosity and abundance. It is a place where everyone is asked to always wear these clothes of righteousness, to always be prepared to live the love they have received in a world that could use more love.

The kingdom of heaven is like this:

*One day a man said to God, "God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like."*

*God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of vegetable stew. It smelled delicious and made the man's mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.*

*The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, "You have seen Hell."*

*Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful vegetable stew that made the man's mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.*

*The man said, "I don't understand."*

*God smiled. It is simple, he said, Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy only think of themselves...*

The kingdom of heaven is like this: when someone comes in and tries to re-define so as to restrict who can be called children of God, or when someone comes in and defines sin as the person sitting near them, or when someone comes in sowing discord and evil instead of love, judgment instead of compassion and empathy, wielding power and empire and their tools of violence. When someone teaches that these parables of Jesus are condemnations of the Jewish people and there should be consequences, or that "trans-ness" needs to be eradicated, or that women should be pastors or any kind of leader, or... or... those folks are invited to put on Christ. they are asked to be part of what God is doing, filled with love and compassion. And if they choose not to, they are asked to leave, to be outside of the community. they are invited to leave, they are asked to leave, because the kingdom of heaven isn't a place for those who dress themselves in anger and hatred and violence and abuse.

I want to leave us with one more parable, written by Rev. Nathan Williams of Des Moines, IA.

The kingdom of heaven is like this: a drag queen who wanted to offer a safe space for the gay and lesbian people in her community. She looked for real estate where she could open a social club, but nobody would rent to a group that was

technically illegal. She found a landlord who was sketchy at best but willing to look the other way, and she opened a venue. But they harassed the patrons, arrested them for showing themselves in public, and raided the bar. The queen had enough. She threw a brick at the cops and sparked what they called a riot.

Then she said, "I'm tired of hiding and living in shame. Let's have a parade, right down the street, and show them we are proud of who we are." So they went and gathered up the whole community, and they marched and sang and danced, and they thumbed their nose at the hate and laughed at the disapproval. It took years, but they kept dancing and celebrating, and the party got bigger and louder, and the kids started to believe that they might get to grow up to be who they truly were.

Then one year the queen went to the festival, and she saw someone changing the signs on the bathrooms, pulling books out of the little free library, and arguing with the doctors about whether their patients were in their right minds. So the queen said to the mutual aid activists, "Get them out of our festival, and don't let them hurt anyone in this community."

For everyone is welcome, but we care about who is here.