Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’ (Matthew 22:1-14 NRSV)

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and killed them. Later the king said of one of his wedding guests, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Good morning. Welcome to Duke Chapel. Who’s ready for a sermon on hell?

The parable of the Wedding Banquet is the last of three parables in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus tells in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. These are apocalyptic parables, thick in militant imagery of judgment and death, as well as invitation and celebration. The text clearly defines Jesus’ audience – the Pharisees and the chief priests of the Temple. He is in a heated argument with members of his Jewish religious family. Most scholars think that there is an added layer to this text. The gospel writer, Matthew, is also thinking about the sacking of Jerusalem in 70CE, about 35 years after Jesus’ death. One of the commentators I read this week wrote: “the list of characters in the parable is clear: The king is God, Jesus is the king’s son, the invited guests are the same cast of characters as the wicked tenants in the previous parable, the destruction of the city refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman troops … and the servants who bring in “the good and the bad” are Christian missionaries who bring everyone into the church.” Well, we cleared that up. Let’s go home.

If we follow that line of thinking, then the wedding robes that the partygoers wear at the end of the parable must represent the righteousness of those who enter the kingdom of heaven. One preacher noted, “Calvin said the wedding robe was the robe of good works. Augustine said it was the robe of love. Luther, being Luther, said it was the robe of faith.

1 Susan Eastman, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Proper 23, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
They are all [correct]. … [These] are the clothes which we are to wear to God’s party. And if we choose not to wear them, if we choose not to participate, the parable says, we are not welcome at the dance.”

If I preach the text this way, then the parable becomes a warning against being a “party pooper.” One commentator wrote that the purpose of this one guest being thrown out of the party at the end of the parable is to guarantee that readers do not confuse universal election with universalism. In other words, God welcomes everyone to the party, but if you do not put on the robe of righteousness, then you will be cast into the outer darkness. If you reject God’s invitation, you will burn in a righteous fire. I told one friend this week that I was struggling with this text and he said, “It’s because you’re afraid to preach God’s judgment. Everybody loves God’s mercy. But here Jesus is proclaiming the whole counsel of God – mercy and judgment, heaven and hell – in order that some might be saved.”

Now, maybe what I’m about to say is blasphemy, or heresy, or some other theological error. If you need to, hold what I am about to say loosely. But I can’t preach a sermon this morning about the party pooper. Maybe it’s that every sermon I ever heard on hell was preached by someone who knew for sure that it would never happen to them.

Maybe I’m just weak-kneed about the fire and the flames. But this sermon will have to be something a little different.

So here are three things I hear in this parable from Jesus. Perhaps there is spiritual wisdom in my words. Perhaps not. But this is what I hear.

The first has to do with what we call “scapegoats.” A scapegoat is a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others. It was originally a Jewish concept, from the 16th chapter of the book of Leviticus,

> Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away … The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.  

Today we use scapegoats differently than the way God instructed Aaron to use them. First, we use people instead of goats. We identify people who can be punished, or tortured, or subjected to mistreatment, and in doing so we feel a sense of release from our sin, our confusion, and our iniquity. Second, instead of setting our scapegoats free in the wilderness, we kill them. Or cover them in shame, and tell them to disappear. Or we silence them.

2 Andrew Purves, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Proper 23, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
3 My reading of the parable hews more closely to the work of Jewish biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine, who writes, “It would be better if we perhaps started with by seeing the parable not as about heaven or hell or final judgment, but about kings, politics, violence, and the absence of justice. If we do, we might be getting closer to Jesus.” Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 282.
4 Leviticus 16:21-22
The United Methodist elder Pamela Lightsey tells this story about being a young woman in the church. She writes, “During my twenties, I was silenced by my pastor because I asked too many questions about the church’s laws including those against women wearing pants and jewelry. This line of questioning was determined to be my stubborn resistance to the rules of our Pentecostal church and highly disrespectful to our female pastor. Being silenced meant I could not sing in the choir, teach, comment or ask questions during Sunday School, and I was denied the opportunity to stand and give my testimony. …What I had to say did not matter during the days of my punishment.”

Now, Rodney, let me ask you something. If we silence everyone in the choir who is stubborn, how many singers would we have left? And Bruce, if we blocked everyone who has questions about one or another passage in the Bible, who would be able to stand in this pulpit to preach? What Lightsey experiences is a scapegoating. The sins of the community projected onto one person or one body. We punish the one to avoid facing the reality of our collective imperfections. I give thanks to God that she didn’t give up on the church in her early years.

The king in this parable sends troops to murder those who attack him and reject his invitation. He then compels all those from the nearby streets into the wedding banquet hall for a party. This feels to me like a classic scapegoat narrative. One group dies and the other lives. As that friend said to me, “Jesus proclaims God’s judgment so that some might be saved.” He left unsaid, “And that some might be damned.” Your damnation marks my salvation, my salvation marks your damnation. Like two sides of the same coin.

Now, hear me clearly: There is a logic of salvation in Christianity whereby Jesus is the lamb that is slain for the sins of the world. This is the logic of the death of the body of Jesus. But we make a grave error if we think that we can repeat this logic on the bodies of God’s children and call it discipleship. Jesus may be the scapegoat for our sin, but if he is then he must also be the scapegoat that ends all scapegoating. Remember these other words from Matthew’s gospel. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” Or, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at another with lust has already committed adultery in their heart.”

After the crucifixion of Christ, we cannot say, “Some must die so that others can live.” “Some are in prison so that others can be free.” “Some must be poor so that others can be rich.” These are stories that the rich, and the free, and the living tell ourselves to help us sleep at night. These are the stories people at the party tell one another while a guest is carried out and thrown into the darkness. Jesus died to put an end to such stories.

The second thing I see in the parable is this: “Scapegoating does not work without the complicity of the crowd – that is, without the tacit and implicit acceptance of bystanders.” Those are the words of Elizabeth Vasko, professor of theology at Duquesne University. Vasko has written an incredible book titled Beyond Apathy: A Theology for Bystanders. In it she explores the way Christians fail to engage our complicity in oppression. In trying to avoid conflict and protect our own moral innocence, we stand by as others suffer, right in front of our eyes.

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5 Pamela Lightsey, Our Lives Matter, x.
6 Matthew 7:3 NRSV
7 Matthew 5:27-28 NRSV
8 Elizabeth Vasko, Beyond Apathy, 192.
After reading Vasko’s book, I see this scene with the un-robed man and the wedding guests at a banquet differently. I see a man being thrown into the pit of darkness, and not one person at the party sees fit to come to his defense.

This week we heard reports from over 25 women describing sexual harassment, assault, and rape at the hands of one Hollywood executive. In the last year we have seen arguably the most powerful man in politics, the most powerful man in television, and the most powerful man in Hollywood all accused of multiple, multiple reports of sexual assault. Two days ago, a senior at Duke, Amy Wang, wrote a column in the student newspaper calling all of us to face the problem of sexual assault on this campus. Liberal, conservative, West Coast, East Coast, North, South and right here on this campus – the problem is everywhere.

The scapegoat question is, where did these monsters come from?

The by-stander question ought to be, what am I doing in my workplace, my home, my school, my dorm, to make it a safe place for women, transgender individuals, and other vulnerable people? What changes will I make to my life, so that I’m ready when the powerful man comes calling for the body standing next to mine?

Scapegoating doesn’t work without the complicity of the crowd. These are hard words to hear, but they are true. Prison doors don’t lock without a stable of guards to turn the key. Bodies aren’t rounded up and deported without taxpayer dollars. Carbon emissions don’t rise without cars and planes full of passengers. A powerful movie producer can’t assault a young actress without assistants and schedulers who look the other way, actors who defend his integrity when they know it’s a lie, and audiences that buy tickets to the blockbuster, no matter what. You can’t even crucify Jesus without a crowd cheering you on.

You want a sermon on hellfire and damnation? Here’s a sermon on hellfire and damnation. I am the crowd. I am the taxpayer. I am the prison guard. I am the moviegoer. I’m the one who will stand by and watch as a man be thrown into the outer darkness, so long as it means I get to keep partying, food in my belly and a drink in my hand. I do love a good wedding reception.

How about you? Are you starting to feel the heat?

Here’s the third thing I see in this passage. Mayra Rivera is a theologian at Harvard Divinity School. Rivera identifies what she calls “disruptive bodies.” These are bodies that don’t fit in or mix well. They stand out. Disruptive bodies force us to ask uncomfortable questions and face difficult truths. They ruin the party.

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9 Vasko writes, “Silence is a double-sided coin. On the one hand, the silence that informs active listening is crucial to the work of solidarity. … Silence affords us the opportunity to take a step back … from imposing our own framework on another person’s words. … [But] Silence can also signify racial disengagement. It can be a form of hiding from what makes us uncomfortable, or conflict avoidance marked by a failure to engage … especially when engagement challenges our own sense of moral innocence. Vasko, Beyond Apathy, 82.

10 Professor Vasko says this: “Sacrificial scapegoating blames victims, allowing those who are systemically privileged to maintain a sense of moral innocence without relinquishing social dominance and the benefits that they accrue.” Vasko, Beyond Apathy, 93.
Rivera says that Jesus is one of these disruptive bodies. Following the 25th chapter of Matthew, she says that when we support and care for other disruptive bodies, we are supporting and caring for Jesus. She writes, “Attending to the spirit in the flesh of rejected, disorderly bodies is hardly to dismiss Jesus’ body.” Instead, when we embrace the bodies of others, we encounter “the scandal of divinity in the flesh.”

The Spirit of God calls us to see disruptive bodies, to listen to their words, and to align our bodies with theirs in solidarity. And yet they can be hard for us to hear, in a world filled with so much noise. Think of the actress who finally tells her story of abuse – she might feel scared and unafraid, open and closed off, all at once. If you are a disruptive body, you might feel proud of standing up, but tired of being beaten down, convicted but also confused, Spirit-filled and yet totally alone. If you feel all of that, at once, you might just be… speechless.

How do we move out of being bystanders and into the active work of solidarity? Start here: believe the voice of the disruptive, wounded body. When she says, “There is no pain like being told that you are ‘illegal,’” believe her. When he says, “I am more than just the crime I committed when I was 16 years old,” believe him. When she says, “I don’t want to be alone with that man,” believe her. When she says nothing at all, totally speechless, believe her silence.

But, you say. What if? How about? What if I? Many are called, says Jesus, but so few, so few…

The silent one at the party is like Jesus. In the face of an interrogation, Jesus says nothing. A crowd of bystanders do not intervene to stop his torture. Soldiers strip him naked, casting lots for his clothes. His body is carried to the outer darkness of a hill called Golgotha. Will you listen to the call of this broken body? Will you listen to the call of the broken bodies around you? Will you believe them, even if they are silent? Especially if they are silent?

Matthew has given us this strange parable. Here is a good word from it: Righteousness is not a robe. This white fabric does not mean anything to God. It is not love, or faith, or good works. Righteousness is a body, transformed in spirit and flesh.

Righteousness is a body joined with other bodies, bound together by the Spirit of the One who came in the flesh.

The disruptive body of Christ is the scapegoat that ends all scapegoating. It is the body cast into the outer darkness so that none who are cast out by the world will ever be alone. The body that rises so that all might live.

The parable gives us, in the end, a choice. We can be kings, prideful and mighty. We can be bystanders, robed in declarations of our worthiness, with bellies full and glasses raised. God willing, we will be transformed into holy disruptors. And if the Spirit of God is with us, the kings of this world will weep and gnash their teeth at the trouble we cause.

Now that will be one hell of a judgment day. That’s a party I’d get dressed up for.

How about you?
Rivera writes, “The spirit that I am invoking here is not imagined as an alien element added to earthly objects. It is not an external container, a teleological goal, or an archetypal form that would gather the complexity of flesh into a unified whole. The spirit is that intrinsic part of the flesh. … Spirit and flesh flow into one another, each transfigures the other. The boundary between them remains as elusive as it is vital.”