***Responsibility #3 What Does It Mean to be True to Ourselves*** *a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 15, 2023 based on Matthew 22:1-14*

One thing I find endlessly interesting are the differences you can find in the four gospels. Even the two that are most alike, the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke are miles apart when it comes to tone and message. Each gospel was written by someone in a church in the first century expressing a particular message about Jesus. Sometimes Jesus comes out sounding full of grace, and sometimes he comes out sounding full of venom.

Now, I will tell you that if Matthew and Luke had churches in Beaverton, I would definitely go to Luke’s church. If I ever visited Matthew’s church, I would sit near the door. He’s the one full of venom. Things are so artificially black and white for him.

In his world, you are either a sheep or a goat, a grain of wheat or a weed, a wise maiden or a foolish one. If you pretend to be one when you are in fact the other, then woe to you, you hypocrite—you wolf in sheep’s clothing. Guess where you are headed when the great judge of history comes according to Matthew?

Matthew is what we call a fire and brimstone preacher. Either Matthew or a later editor of his gospel gets really excited about hell which he conceives as a massive dumpster fire where a lot of sorry hypocrites are going to grind their teeth for all eternity.

Matthew’s gospel can’t seem to get enough of this. Over and over, it puts hell in Jesus’ mouth, filling the fiery furnace with sinners of every kind: evildoers, unfaithful stewards, wicked servants.

The gospel seems to enjoy reporting bad news, the same way it seems to enjoy telling today’s parable of the wedding banquet.

The first part is bad enough. The king invites his A-list friends to his son’s wedding, but they don’t show up.

When he sends his slaves to fetch them, they not only make light of the invitation—they kill the messengers, which so enrages the king that he puts the roast ox and the fatted calves his chefs have prepared for them back in the oven while he rallies his troops to go and kill them all, burning their city to the ground.

Matthew is just warming up. Then the king sends his slaves to summon the B-list, which also includes some people on the C, D, and F lists, most of whom are looking at their phones, changing the oil in their ancient pick-up trucks, or just sleeping in the bushes until the shelter opens when they were summoned to the king’s wedding banquet.

“Wow! We must have won the lottery,” they think. So they show up. And you know what happens.

The king notices one of them who is not dressed appropriately and acts as if that is some kind of big surprise, and when the guy has nothing to say for himself he orders him bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

You see why I would rather we attend Luke’s church?

Well, we can’t. We’re in Matthew’s church this morning. It’s his turn to give the sermon, and if you have a hard time sitting still, don’t forget: it’s only *his* version of the story; the real story belongs to Jesus and though it takes a bit of work to understand it, it might be worth the trouble.

Barbara Brown Taylor, whose take on this scripture I am using, has said the following (I could say the same, but not so well):

“I have spent so much of my life changing bandages on people wounded by brutal religion that you have to keep an eye on me, to make sure I don’t round off edges God means to keep sharp. My problem is that I really believe the gospel is good news—that even the hardest sayings, recorded by those with the angriest ears, have life in them somewhere, with truth I need to know.”

Well, this parable reminds me of a recurring dream I have had. It takes a number of forms but it is always the same at bottom. I am doing something that requires a certain skill set and lots of preparation, and in the dream I lack both -- so the dream ends up being about me being found-out as a kind of imposter.

I had the dream a lot in college when I was a theater major for a year. I would be on stage, and it would be my turn to speak, and I would have no idea what play I was actually in. When it was my turn to speak, I would mutter something made-up in total panic and wake up in a cold sweat.

I had the same dream when I first became a minister – someone had died and I was being called in to do the funeral, and I would show up a little after it had begun with no idea who died or what I should say.

I would bet many of you could recount similar nightmares. It is always about the fear of being “found out.”

When I was in graduate school studying literature, I remember having the same fear – fear that people would find out my father had not even gone to college and had begun as a blue collar employee of the phone company. Who was I to study British poetry?

I have a nearly new academic robe someone gave me 30 years ago and I can’t wear it because it has stripes designating a doctorate, which I never got around to getting, so it sits there in my closet reminding me of that fact and also that it’s okay for me to just be me.

It’s like the wedding garment in the parable today – I wouldn’t want to be caught wearing something I hadn’t earned.

But look, as hard as we may work to prevent it, it is finally going to happen. People are going to learn the truth about us: that we are fallible, or that we have no business being somewhere, or that we don’t know the language or don’t know which fork to use or don’t remember our lines or our host’s name—or that our body really is not as attractive as we hope it is; that in some way we are “naked” and that people are looking at us and there is nothing that we can find to cover ourselves up.

That’s the message of the parable.

Everyone else at the banquet seems to have gotten a memo that the under-dressed guest hasn’t. “Friend,” the king says to him. “Friend.”

This is a lousy translation. The word *buster* would be better. “Buster,” the king says to him, “how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” Just like in one of our dreams.

Jesus called it a parable, which is almost the same thing as a recurring dream. Parables are stories you can walk around in, stories that ask for a response from you. They challenge you to ask yourself, which character in them are you?

I mean, which character are you today? I say “today,” because it can change. Think of the prodigal son parable. At age twenty, you may be the prodigal son himself. At 30, you may become the older brother. At 50, boom, you are their dad. Maybe life is as long as it is so we can learn all three lessons because, you know, they are all different lessons.

Today’s parable, like our nightmares, wants us to ask ourselves what our relationship with the truth is. Are we comfortable with our sense of who we are, or is there some insecurity in us that the parable may ferret out, because, I mean, we may feel like the wedding guest who is dressed-down by the king. We may feel we are imposters in some way; we may feel we are hypocrites.

You know, being a hypocrite is hard work. It is so difficult to keep two yous going—the public you and the private you; the you that you think you are, and the you that you really behave like; the you you dress like and the you you really are.

You may think of yourself as an environmentalist but you gobble energy like the Moda Center. You may say, “Have a great day” to the lady at New Seasons, and then you drive your car like a bat out of hell. You tell everyone how worried you are about the people in Israel, Ukraine, Gaza, but do you do anything about it? I am speaking here of myself. I have to be careful because there is no hypocrite like a preaching hypocrite.

Speaking from experience, I would have to say that the only thing worse than being a hypocrite is waiting for someone to expose you as one. That’s why it feels so good to get the duplicity off your chest. And look, we’ve been dealing with this stuff our whole lives. We start young.

Adrianne Borgia of Oakland tells her own story of getting her start in first grade …

***CATHOLIC SCHOOLS****start training students for the sacrament of confession at about the age of six. To a first-grader the concept is confusing. The nuns gave us detailed lists of sins, some of which I’d never even heard of. I worried that maybe I’d committed some of them without meaning to. By the time my first confession arrived, I had studied the lists and made up my mind what I needed to admit. I entered the confessional and knelt in the darkness, and the sliding door covering the screen slid to one side. I started to recite what I’d rehearsed. When I came to the part about my sins, I said, “I have disobeyed my parents four times, lied once, and committed adultery.*

*There was a snicker from the other side of the screen. I didn’t know why. But it was true: I*had*tried to act like an adult. I hadn’t even known it was wrong.*

Okay, to be more serious about coming clean concerning who we really are, let me remind us of the rally in Charlottesville 6 years ago where the rotten underbelly of America was shown to us all. All those white men flaunting their extreme racism. Admitting they could be members of KKK or a Hitler Nazi if given the opportunity.

I remember wondering how the heck such a thing could happen. Had I been born in a different family, I wondered if I could have been part of something so loathsome.

There was a letter to the editor of *The Salt Lake Tribune* at the time, written by Jonna Ramey calling out the white supremacists involved. She was speaking for millions of us in this country. Here’s what she said:

*I am a 67-year-old American white woman. My parents enlisted in World War II to fight fascism. They both served; my mother was a nurse, my father navigated bombers. They lost friends in that bloody war so that all the world could be free of fascism. They did not fight so that some white people could claim supremacy or that Nazis could openly walk the streets of America.*

*White person to white supremacist person: What is wrong with you?*

*People of European heritage are doing just fine in the world. They run most of the world’s institutions, hold much of the world’s wealth, replicate as frequently as other humans. You’re not in any danger here. The world is changing, that’s true. Others want a piece of the pie. They work for it, strive for it and earn it. Technology (I mean, robotics) is having a greater effect on your job prospects than immigrants. Going forward, tackling corporate control and climate change will need all of our attention, ideas and energy. Put down your Tiki torches and trite flags and get involved in some real work.*

*By the way, the world won the war against Nazi fascism in the 1940s, just as America won the war against the Confederacy in the 1860s. Aligning with two lost causes just labels you as profound losers.*

*And finally, white person to white person: Like my parents before me, I will not stand idly by nor give up my rights or the rights of other Americans because you think you are better than some of us. It doesn’t work that way. All Americans stand shoulder to shoulder against your hatred and bigotry.*

As I said, Joanna was calling them out. Many of them thought of themselves as heroes, patriots, angry men who have kept quiet a long time, doing their best to hold down a simmering anger. So, as their inner narrative went, they said to themselves, “Because we have a sympathetic president (remember, that was 2017) it’s finally safe to come out of hiding. We can be ourselves. We can speak the truth.”

Well, look, they weren’t patriots. They were simply dupes of those who wanted to use them to fill this country with their hate. And it’s still going on. Look at what’s happening this last week in the Franklin, Tennessee mayor’s race. There is nothing heroic about Adolf Hitler or any of the misguided wretches that still want to follow him on their way to where he is in Matthew’s version of hell.

Okay, that’s my self-righteous anger speaking. Forgive the hypocrisy in me I have yet to identify that makes me angry instead of shameful as I say these things.

You know, many of those guys in Charlottesville went home to face wives and girlfriends who saw their tiki-torch-lit faces on the news and wanted to know what kind of men they really were. Were they imposters? Was this who they really were? The same thing happened after the siege of the capitol on January 6th. We don’t hear much about those domestic reckonings. I wonder why.

You know, a good number of the people on trial for insurrection at our nation’s capitol in the past year wept before their sentencing. They said they wondered how they could have been so stupid. And then afterward some of them said aloud, “Trump won.”

Who are these people?

Well, it’s easy for me to point at others. But who am I, when push comes to shove? What am I capable of, I wonder? What will my grandchildren think of me when it’s all done?

There is a lot of confusion these days about our true identities, about where we choose to stand. All I know is, history will not be kind to those driven by hatred.

May something in Jesus’s teaching help us resolve to be true to our best selves and to be clear about who we are sometimes tempted to be at our worst.

Amen