

TEXT: Mathew 22:1-14
THEME: We are saved in solidarity
SUBJECT: Implicatedness
TITLE: Beyond Goodness

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
11 October 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Martin Luther called this a “terrible gospel.” One can sympathize. The God of this parable is hard to square with the God described in the majority of the parables, but maybe that is because we like our god domesticated and controllable.

When the guests invited to the wedding—the custom of the day was such that these invitees would have confirmed their intent to attend the wedding and were merely waiting for the announcement that all was ready—refused to show up, the host instructs the servants to go into the streets and invite everyone they see to come to the wedding. The preparations are complete, the food and wine await, all that is needed is guests.

The servants gathered all whom they found, both **good** and **bad**; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. Good and bad together, eating and drinking and dancing, toasting the bride and groom. Good and bad together!

A Methodist minister wrote his reflections on working with HIV patients in London. He described in relentless detail some of the sufferings, mental and physical, which he had witnessed. He noted that the problem with so much of the work and ministry undertaken with people living with HIV was predicated on the assumption that it was about good people doing good to other people, and goodness, he said, was the problem.

We do things in order to be good—or perhaps to *seem* good. The result, very often, with the best and most generous will in the world, is that people’s sense of isolation, powerlessness, and rejection is intensified rather than healed.

In Marilynne Robinson’s novel, *Lila*, Lila suggests that the good are those who don’t always see what they’re *implicated* in. We like to define ourselves as good very often because we like to make sure where our boundaries are; we like to be confident that who we are and what we are is generated by good motivation, or by divine agency, or by good education and upbringing, or by generosity of temperament.

But this can blind us to the ways in which we are shaped by what we don’t know. As a self, I’m always already implicated in what I don’t know and what I don’t see, and simply to focus on goodness in a narrow and self-defining way can be a problem rather than a blessing. What the novel shows us is that we can never be “good” on our own. We are never anything on our own. We are always *implicated*—tangled and embedded in relations we have not chosen.

What does it mean for us to be bound to one another and shaped by one another to the extent that none of us can be brought back into the full healing relation with God without being brought back to one another? We have to move, Rowan Williams argues, from a focus on goodness to a focus

on *solidarity*. At the end of the novel, Lila is left wondering how she can be redeemed apart from the others who made her to be who she is.

A theological interlude: enter, stage left, Karl Barth. His lasting contribution to theology, according to those who know such things, is his understanding of the doctrine of election. In short, Barth argues, God's eternal election is a radical affirmation that the world is connected and that no being within the world, no element within the world lives except from the life of another.

Paul insisted that none of us can imagine our healing and reconciliation purely as atoms, as mutually isolated individuals. To begin to imagine a healing that we can only achieve together, we have to begin to purge our imaginations of some of the fantasies of a "goodness" that can be ours in the absence of the neighbor.

To be good is so often to be good at the expense of those we are being good to, however much we might try to conceal that. C.S. Lewis quipped, "She lived for others. You could tell the others by their haunted look." Jesus famously reacted to being called "good," saying, "Call no man good. Only God is good." The point of the incarnation is not goodness but solidarity. Jesus "sanctifies" himself by accepting the reproach and pain of the rejected.

We are inextricably implicated in one another's lives. When Jesus becomes exasperated by the defenders of the good, he says to them, "We played flutes for you and you did not dance; we wailed in lamentation and you did not beat your breasts." For John came neither eating or drinking, and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a gluttonous and wine-besotted man, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

If the life and work of Jesus teaches us anything, it is his call to solidarity with the least, the outcast, the sinners. Jesus invites us to see goodness or holiness not as segregated from the bad or profane, but in proximity to those most in need. A Russian Orthodox priest put it this way, "We all go to heaven in each other's pockets."

This brings us to the most perplexing part of the parable. The host enters the wedding hall and discovers *one* guest not wearing a wedding garment. Many guests were good; many guests were bad. But only one was improperly dressed. When confronted by the host, the guest is silent. Why? The invitation was last minute and perhaps the local tux shop was out of rentals or was closed.

Charles Williams, British novelist and theologian, imagined the man turned up simply *in his own clothes*, because he believed he was sufficient unto himself. Williams says we all come to the wedding banquet dressed in each other's virtue, each other's love, each other's vision. The problem of the man without a wedding garment is that he has come with nothing but what is his, denying the reality of others with whom he is implicated, who have helped make him who he is.

What Lila realizes at the end of the novel is the way in which a whole series of profoundly flawed, guilty, damaged persons have mysteriously helped to create in her a responsiveness to grace. She has discovered *her* response to grace because of all those damaged lives that have surrounded and entered into her own.

If something of them lives in her, there's something at work in *them* that breaks the hold of destructiveness and challenges the triumph of death. And that "something" is what the grace of God does and works with. That's why Lila cannot imagine being where she is without those who've made her who she is.

Grace, not goodness, is the key to our healing. We're healed in relation not only to God but to one another. Without that dimension, we're back with toxic goodness again, the goodness that forgets and excludes.

Goodness is not enough. Goodness, self-defined and self-contained (wearing our own clothes to the wedding), is something which will be poisonous if we're not careful. Without the wound, the openness, the crack that connects us to reality, to one another, and to God, healing doesn't happen.

Saint Antony of the Egypt remarked, "Our life and our death are with our neighbor." Understand our implicatedness in a sinful world, and we begin to understand why we are saved not by goodness, but by a new level of connection which we call the body of Christ.

(This sermon is indebted to the work of Rowan Williams.)

PRAYER: St Isaac of Nineveh. (d. c.700) Ordained Bishop of Nineveh

"Mystery Beyond the Words" translated by Scott Cairns

Even if such words as *wrath, anger, hatred*, and many meager others are pressed into speaking of the Creator, we should not suppose that He ever does anything in anger or hatred or zeal. Many such figures are employed in the roiling span of Scripture, provisional terms far removed from Who He Is.

Even as our own, relatively rational persons have already been tweaked, increasingly if slowly made more competent in holy understanding of the Mystery—namely, that we should not take things quite so literally, but should suspect (concealed within the corporal surfaces of unlikely narrative) a hidden providence and eternal knowledge Guiding all—so too we shall in future come to see the sweep of many things to be quite contrary to what our current, Puerile processes afford us.