

## **Kingdom Economics: Celebrating the Bounty**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on October 15, 2017  
on Matthew 22:1-14 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

Several years ago, three of the biggest names in preaching — preaching superstars, unless that’s an oxymoron! — went to a baseball game together. It was a cool September night at the Atlanta Braves game, and Barbara Brown Taylor, Tom Long, and Fred Craddock were sitting on the third base side in some pretty good seats. All was going well, but there were these really obnoxious young men sitting just to their right. These guys were having a little too much to drink, and it was affecting their behavior in significant ways. They got rowdy and loud, and with each passing inning, they became more and more disturbing to all those around them who were just trying to watch some baseball!

Well right about the seventh inning, three large security guards swooped in, grabbed the ring leader of the bunch, and began hustling him out of the stadium. Not skipping a beat, Fred Craddock turned to Tom and Barbara and said, “That poor ole’ chap must not have worn the proper wedding garments!”<sup>1</sup>

For those of us who laughed and enjoy a bad preacher joke from time to time, it’s funny because it’s so ridiculous. Let me remind you of the fantastical parable from which it came: “The kingdom of God is to be

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<sup>1</sup> Story quoted in the following sermon: <https://firstpres-durham.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/10.09.pdf>

compared to the reality of a king who threw a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out his slaves to remind the guests about the feast, and they out and out refused to come. Aghast, the king sent slaves to remind them again, and this time, their responses were even worse — some blew off the invitation, a few went back to work, and several even assaulted or killed those messenger slaves. Well the king had had it! People don't tell him no; his authority is unquestioned. Enraged, he sends forth his army and then sets fire to the city out of spite. And perhaps out of necessity or embarrassment, he sends out his slaves again to round up anyone they could find — good and bad — to come in for the feast. They did, but it seemed the king's anger hadn't yet cooled. Because one of those unexpected guests showed up as he was, clad in his everyday attire instead of the expected wedding robe, and the king raged again: "throw that man out," he instructed, "and not just out of the party, out into eternal darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is the word of the Lord? *Thanks be to God?*

It sounds familiar to the other telling of this parable in Luke — the fancy feast, the invited guests who give excuses rather than attendance, the master's instruction to go get alternate guests — but Matthew's take on feels distorted to me, almost like those funhouse mirrors that kinda look like you, only way longer or wider. Where Luke's invited guests have reasonable excuses, Matthew's don't; Luke's master simply invites those who might never get invited to things, but Matthew's king resorts to

immediate violence and torches the city in retaliation; Luke's banquet hall is filled with those from the roads and the lanes, the highways and the byways; Matthew's is too, but the king gets offended because one such guest wasn't dressed appropriately and kicks him out into eternal darkness!

We've been spending this last month in the parables of Jesus, these with increasing urgency as his final fate draws near, and it's only natural to find some equivalencies between this story and God's story. Perhaps we hear it and think God is like that king, quick to anger and spiteful if we don't measure up. Or maybe we hear it and think that God organizes the kingdom like that king did, where the privilege goes to the elite and all the rest are just second-class. We might even worry that we might never be on God's invite list, wondering if there's even a place for us in the realm of God. And I wonder again: *the word of the Lord?* Just exactly where is the good news here?

One of the occupational hazards of being a Christian pastor is the reaction of people I meet for the first time when the work I do comes up in conversation. I've gotten to where I can read pretty easily the 'oh?' I hear in response. There's the *"I haven't been to church since Easter; how quickly can I get out of this conversation?"* 'oh.'; and the *"you actually believe that stuff?"* 'oh?!'; and the *"I just read this thing/saw this movie/heard this podcast/had this back-and-forth on Facebook, and I've been meaning to ask a professional Christian about it"* 'oh!!'. Those don't faze

me now, but the haunting 'oh' is the one with some baggage behind it, the one that clearly indicates that your job has triggered something deep within them.

Sometimes folks just get quiet or change the subject, and I immediately wonder about their past — what experience they may have had with God or church, how it wounded them, what place it now occupies in their everyday lives. Other times people come out swinging, ready with their best argument or apologetic against a God who is unwelcome, angry, judgmental, and obsolete. It's in these conversations that my former pastor Joe would stop them and say, "tell me about this God you don't believe in, because it's likely I don't believe in that God either."

Too often, that God that people don't believe in looks an awful lot like the king in today's parable: demanding, jealous, authoritative, arbitrary. And it makes me wonder — are we simply confusing the kingdoms of this world and the kings who run them with the kingdom/commonwealth/dream/new day of God and the God who tells a different story?

Because the kings of this world I see are ones who abuse their power, who justify their desires for pleasure at the expense of the vulnerable and lord their dominance over the disadvantaged. But the God I know is the one who called out the powerful for their neglect of children

and exploitation of the oppressed, their exclusive claims on the Divine and their judgment of all the rest.<sup>2</sup>

The kings I see are ones who are threatened by appearances, who obsessively cultivate their images lest they seem exposed or weak. But the God I know is the one who took on human flesh as a poor and homeless Palestinian Jewish carpenter, wearing the skin of a marginalized people to point the powerful and powerless to God.

The kings I see are ones who are filled with pride and insatiable egos, who love the limelight and lavish in unfettered adoration around the tables of their own making. But the God I know is the one whose power is made perfect in weakness, who stooped to wash the feet of his disciples and modeled what true leadership should look like, who turned over the tables where all were not welcome.

The kings I see are ones who are inflexible and bound exclusively to their own perspectives, ideas, and ways of being, who forego compromise for quarreling, who are far more overbearing than open-minded. But the God I know is expansive and abundant, intimately tied to the ongoing story of the world that enables God's ongoing 'becoming' too.

The kings I see are quick to point fingers, assign blame, and criticize opponents, who cannot for a moment concede any role in stagnation or

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<sup>2</sup> Here's a wonderful read on the various things that made Jesus angry: <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/worldview/what-makes-jesus-angry>

failure. But the God I know willingly let the sins of the world nail him to a cross, even to the point of death.

**The kings I see demand credit, whose appetite for attention can never be quenched. But the God I know changed the world *when nobody was looking* one dark Sunday morning in the mouth of an open tomb.**

Perhaps the lesson we are to learn from this disturbing parable of a demanding, jealous, authoritative, and arbitrary king is that the God we know and in whose name we gather an worship is quite the opposite. Instead of inviting an exclusive elite, God gathers us all in — the lost and forsaken, the blind and the lame, the haven't-been-to-church-since-Easter people and the how-can-you-believe-that-stuff people. Instead of raging in violent, destructive anger if the invitation goes unanswered, God persists patiently, chasing after each beloved child like the lost sheep who left the 99 and rejoicing when every one is found and returned to the flock. Instead of tossing out those deemed unworthy or insufficient, God's grace is sufficient and God's mercies are new every morning. Instead of a meager meal where guests leave hungry and wanting, forgotten or forsaken, God sets before us all a banquet of Hope, a bounty of Peace, an abundance of Joy, and a feast of Love.

What has drawn you to this feast of Love today? Perhaps you are here out of guilt, believing this weekly worship to be the absolution you need for events of your week. Or maybe you're here to appease your spouse or your parents, present only in body but certainly not in mind or

soul. For some, worship might simply be a routine or a habit; for others, it may be just the nourishment your spirit hungers for each week. Whatever carries you to this table of worship and fellowship, may you meet here the God who knows you by name and calls you beloved.

Some 30 years ago, a quirky little Danish film called *Babette's Feast* was released to a heap of accolades, for the story it tells is timeless. It began in 19th century Denmark, where we meet two sisters living in a rural town with their father, the local pastor of their village church. They were a puritanical people, choosing a strict and spare lifestyle so as to give as much as they could to help the needy in their community. Nowhere was that more evident than in their daily meal of bland fish soup and gruel, a meal so basic that a number of hungry folks could be fed. Unlike others, these sisters had the opportunity to leave the village as they became adults, but out of obligation, they agreed to stay for the sake of their dad and their church.

More than 25 years pass, Pastor has died, and those two sisters have become the leaders of their church. One night in the midst of a howling storm, the sisters hear a knock on their door. Barely standing, half-dead from prolonged exposure to the elements is Babette, a refugee from the French Civil War left with nothing, just begging the sisters to take her in and give her a job. The sisters had no money for Babette, but they agreed to let her work for her room and board.

Eager to please her new housemates, Babette learns how to make the fish soup and gruel. She takes over the shopping, freeing the sisters to spend more time with their parishioners. And slowly but unmistakably, a change begins to creep into their midst. The fish soup doesn't taste as bland. Money is left over. The grumbling and bickering that once filled the dinner table was silenced by the warm presence of Babette.

One day, Babette gets a letter from France — the first since she left it decades ago — telling her that she'd won the lottery and would soon be the recipient of some 10,000 francs! The sisters assumed that Babette would leave them, her need for room and board abated now by the unexpected windfall. But instead, Babette asked to fix a meal — one unlike any they'd ever had — upon what would have been the 100th birthday of Pastor/father, and asked to make a trip back to France to prepare. The sisters are concerned about what this meal inspired by a French lottery could be, but reluctantly agreed.

Soon after, boxes and crates bearing the most unique delicacies began to arrive from France: the finest china, flawless crystal, luxurious linens, and the very best ingredients that money could buy. Despite even more protests from the sisters, Babette prepares for them the feast of a lifetime. The table groaned under the platters of quail, the steaming-hot turtle soup, the mounds of fruit and cheeses, a heaping of pastries and baked goods, and the perfect wine to compliment each of the six courses. It was a feast fit for a king.



Well despite their very best ascetic efforts to resist such a tremendous meal, the sisters and parishioners simply cannot keep from enjoying it. For honored guests and church members alike, the whole experience transforms them — resentments lift, anger softens, grudges give way to forgiveness. And surprise of all surprises, not only do they learn that Babette was the famous former Chef of the Café Anglais, the most prestigious restaurant in France, but also that she had spent every cent of those 10,000 francs on the meal itself!<sup>3</sup>

Now *that's* the way to throw a banquet! Because there's just something special when a recognized authority (in cooking or kingship) becomes a poor refugee, emptying oneself, taking on the form of a servant, and preparing the table of Love. It becomes a bounty to celebrate, a story of abundance that looks just like the God from whence it came. This is a feast to which all are invited; this is a feast filled with good news to share! Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> A beautiful retelling of *Babette's Feast* can be found here: <https://www.readthespirit.com/visual-parables/babettes-feast-1987/>