

A Problem with Pericopes

Matthew 22:1-14

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

There is a problem with reading the Bible in snippets. The problem is that we do it all of the time.

If you are a devoted reading of Portals of Prayer and you bother to look up and read the Bible passages that are in the corner of each page and then read the devotion you wind up reading a snippet of the Bible every day.

If you are a person who reads a chapter or two of the Bible every day, you are reading the Bible in larger snippets, but you are still reading it in snippets.

When you come to the Divine Service the periscopes are the selections of the Bible that lector and I read to you. They are selections determined by ecumenical and ancient practice. But they are snippets. The lector and I read a few verses to you and then conclude. Sometimes in the snippets that you get in the Divine Service, I or the lector read a few verses and then skip a few verses and then read a few verses more. Some of you have asked me why those verses get skipped. Sometimes I know the answer and sometimes I don't.

When you watch a TV documentary about the Bible it is even worse, they give you a verse or part of a verse and then talk about it at length. Even expository Bible preachers who are nonliturgical and do not use a lectionary like we do tend to read the Bible in snippets. They will read some verses and then talk about them at length. For those of you who watch Charles Stanley you have seen him do this.

As long as your preacher is orthodox it is ok. He will tell you what you need to know based upon the reading of the whole book from which the snippet is.

Even if you do read the Bible at length and read a whole book of the Bible there are other problems that lead to understanding the Bible in snippets. First of all there are chapters. When the Bible was originally written there were no chapters. Chapters and verses were added later so that we could find things easily in the Bible. When I teach the adult Bible classes here at Immanuel, I can say turn to Matthew, chapter five, verse twenty-three, and you go there and we are all looking at the same part of the Bible. The problem with these divisions is that when you read the Bible and come to a chapter division it seems like there is a change in subject. In other words when you come to this big black number five in the Bible there is tendency on our part to assume that chapter five is going on to a different subject from chapter four. We assume that because in all of the other books that we read a chapter division indicates an advancement in the story or account or line of thinking. Since the chapter divisions are not original to the Bible sometimes they indicate that a new subject has come up and sometimes they do not.

This problem is compounded by our contemporary translations. When you read the Bible in a contemporary translation you come across editorial headings that you tell you what the next few verses are about. Then once you have read those verse the translators insert another editorial heading to let you know what the next verses are about. So even though the Sermon on the Mount is one long continuous speech from Jesus to His disciples the ESV has 21 different editorial headings throughout the whole thing. Some of you have told me that when you read those things it gives the impression that Jesus is saying something totally new and unrelated to what He just said and possibly that He is saying it to different people than the ones He was just talking to. I once read a section of Luke 14 to the adult Bible class where Jesus speaks to the dinner guests of a ruler of a Pharisee. The ESV has three editorial heading in this part of the Bible which gives the impression that Jesus is talking to three different groups of people about three different things. But when I read the entire account of our Lord at the ruler's home it became

apparent to some of you that the Lord said all of those things to same group of people all on one occasion and maybe one right after another. When read that way it changes your understanding of what you are reading. It changes it in a way that the apostle had in mind because if the apostle had wanted chapters and editorial headings, he would have put them in. Editorial headings are handy when you are flipping through the Bible trying to find something specific, but they can be deceiving. Watch out for them. Try to ignore them if you can.

Now, why am I telling you all of this? Because unless you consider the Lord's parable in the context in which He originally spoke it, it is darn scary.

Think about it. A king throws a dinner feast for his son. Without any context we have to decode this on our own. The king is probably God. His Son is probably Jesus. The wedding feast is probably life everlasting in the age to come. As Jay Hageman calls it "the party." As some others call it "heaven." Ok so far so good. There are these people who have been invited to the wedding feast, but when the feast is finally prepared and the slaves of the king go out to let them know, they ignore the king's slaves. One goes to his business, another to his farm. Then some of them kill the king's slaves. The king is mad and burns their city. Ok without context it sounds like if you ignore the slaves of God who would probably be His messengers, you are going to be in big trouble. It sounds like the burning of the city might be hell. Then the king sends out his slaves again and tells them to invite just anybody to come to the wedding feast. Ok, so the slaves do that. They invite the good and the evil. Without context this is probably an indication that the king is gracious and will accept people from all walks of life. The wedding hall is filled with guests and all is well until the king goes in to look at the guests. He sees one of them in their without appropriate attire. Whatever the wedding garments are apparently you need to be wearing them in order to be at the wedding feast. Since this man does not have any wedding garments and since this man doesn't have any explanation for how he entered without them, the king has him bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That sounds like hell also. Then the Lord pronounces at the end of His parable that many are called and few are chosen.

Now if we read this in a snippet without context, this is a pretty scary parable. It sounds like people can make it to the wedding feast and then once they are there they can get thrown out. It sounds like you can make it to the party and still wind up in hell. It sounds like the call of God as we learned in the catechism is not a reliable determinant of our salvation. Pastor has been telling us that faith comes by hearing, well this guy heard and he wound up in hell anyway. It sounds like God has this mysterious will which is inaccessible to us by which He determines who gets to stay at the party and who does not. Do we have any idea what this will is? It seems like we can receive the call of God in the Gospel and still not make it. Are we just doomed? How do we know what His will is toward us?

Without context this is a scary parable.

When you read this it is the opening verses of Matthew, chapter 22, but Matthew did not put chapter 22 there. He makes it clear that the Lord told this parable on the heels of the parable that you heard last week.

What was the parable from last week? Anyone remember? It was the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. The master of a vineyard does everything that he can for a vineyard and then leases it to tenants. When the season for fruit came, he sent his slaves to the tenants to get his fruit. The tenants do not turn over the fruit to the master of the vineyard, rather they kill and mistreat the slaves that he sent to them. The master sends them more slaves with the same result. Finally the master sends them his son. The tenants see the son and think that this is their opportunity to seize control of the vineyard so they kill

the son. The Lord then asks the Pharisees and the chief priests what the master of the vineyard should do to the tenants. The chief priests and the Pharisees answer correctly that he should put those wretches to a miserable and death and let out the tenants to others who will give him the fruit of the vineyard in its season. The Lord responds by quoting Isaiah that the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and anyone on whom it falls will be crushed. The Lord is plain with the Pharisees and chief priests. He tells them that the Kingdom of God has been taken away from them and it will be given to a people producing its fruit.

This statement allows you to decode the parable. The tenants are the chief priests and the Pharisees. The master of the vineyard is obviously God. The son of the master is Jesus. The slaves of God that came to the chief priests and the Pharisees are the all of the prophets that had been sent to Israel through the ages culminating in John the Baptist. It remains somewhat of an open question to whom the vineyard will go, but whoever it is, it will go to a people producing its fruit, which I said last Sunday was a people producing repentance for that is the fruit that John the Baptist demanded of the chief priests and Pharisees when they came to see him.

Now how does this inform how we should decode the parable that our Lord told us today? Well the king is still God. His Son is still Jesus. The wedding feast is the eschatological age. In other words the wedding feast is the end of time celebration when Jesus returns to bestow the salvation that He promised to His people. He will raise the dead. They will be perfect, glorified, and holy. They will never die. And they will live before Him in the restored creation. If you want to call that heaven, that is fine. Some of you call it the party and that certainly fits the parable here. The wedding feast of God thrown for His Son is the place where we want to be. We do not want to be in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We have spoken about the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth before. It is hell. So to decode the parable further, there are only two places that you may wind up when Jesus returns at the end of time, either you are at the party or you are in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, which would be hell.

God's slaves then go out and call those who have already been invited. The people who already had an invitation prior to our Lord's parables is Israel. But Jesus is not speaking about all Israel at this point. He is speaking primarily to the chief priests and the Pharisees. The chief priests and the Pharisees by virtue of their descent from Abraham already had an invitation to the party. God sent His slaves to them to tell them that the party is ready. The slaves of God then were His prophets whom He sent to Israel to extend to them His invitation to His party at the end of time.

The reaction of Israel was to either ignore them or mistreat them. Here the parable becomes a little easier to decode. If you have read the Old Testament you will find accounts especially in Jeremiah but also Amos and other prophets where Israel mistreated her prophets. Elijah was mistreated by Israel. They were either mistreated when Israel ignored them or they were mistreated when Israel abused and killed them. And the result is the same for them no matter which they did. The king burned their city. It does not matter if you reject the slaves of God who bring you His message or simply ignore the slaves of God who bring you His message. In either case the result is that their city is burned.

Since Jesus is talking about the chief priests and the Pharisees, He is telling them that they are of the same cloth as those of the Old Testament who ignored the prophets or mistreated them. He tells them that God is going to burn their city. Their city is Jerusalem. Jesus is predicting that God will burn it. Jesus predicts this again in more detail two chapters later in Matthew's Gospel. It happened when the Romans came against Jerusalem in AD70 and burned the city and destroyed the temple.

So now that Jerusalem is destroyed and the chief priests and the Pharisees are not coming to God's party what is He going to do? The party is ready for His Son. So He sends more slaves out. He tells these slaves go into the main roads and invited anyone that you find. Who are these slaves and who are the people that they invite? It might be non Pharisee Israel, but since Israel of the Old Testament also rejected the prophets that God sent to them, this invitation includes the Gentiles.

So these people are you people. Jerusalem is burned. God has now sent out His apostles to all of the nations to invite them to the party for His Son at the end of time. Because God is rich in mercy and forgives sins, it does not matter if you have been good or evil in your eyes or in the eyes of others, the invitation is yours. Come to the wedding feast.

And then Jesus includes this bit at the end. You must have wedding clothes in order to be at the party. You cannot get in without them. Even if you could get in, God would cast you into hell without them. Why is that part in there?

It is in there to curb your Gentile pride against the Jews.

Our Lord knows that His apostle Matthew will record this parable. Our Lord knows that we Gentiles will read this parable in our churches. Our Lord knows that eventually one of us is going to read the whole thing in one sitting and not read it in snippets and when that happens unless He puts this last part in the parable we Gentiles will know that this is a parable where once again He and His Father have rejected the chief priests and the Pharisees and taken Jerusalem and the Kingdom of God from them and given it to us Gentiles. And when that happens Satan will be there to tempt us to believe that the reason that God gave us His Kingdom and welcomed us to the party was because we are better people than the Pharisees and the chief priests. And once we think we are better than them we have become exactly like them because they believed that they were better than others and that is exactly why God took the kingdom away from them. So in order to keep us from thinking that we were better than the Jews or better than the chief priests and scribes He tells us that we still need wedding garments to make to the party. We will still need to be outfitted correctly in order to make it to the party.

We cannot say that it is because that we are Gentiles that we are saved. The Pharisees said that. John the Baptist had warned them against that. "Do not say to me that we have Abraham as our father, for I tell you God can raise up out of these stones children of Abraham." Thus we cannot say, "We are not children of Abraham!" nor can we say, "At least we did not gripe at you in the wilderness like Israel did." We cannot claim any righteousness of our own.

Which means that if we are to have a wedding garment in order to be at the party it will have to come from the Son in whose honor the Father has thrown the party.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.