

Bowling for God

^{NRS} **Matthew 22:1** Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ 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." ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³ 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.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

Believe it or not this is one of my favorite parables in scripture- this bizarre story about a whack-job king who throws a party for us son and ends up inviting anyone and everyone, because the important people, the nice people, wouldn't come and aren't all that nice about it, and then ends up throwing out this guy with no fashion sense. (I've always thought it would be great to print "God is a Fashion Diva" on a t-shirt and put this text below as a reference. If nothing else you'd get interesting comments, right?)

Now the text starts off great, doesn't it? Jesus tells his disciples- all right, let me tell you what the kingdom is like. And he tells them about this great party that's being planned, and how the animals have been slaughtered, the DJ is playing The Macarena at full blast, the margarita machine is cranking away in the corner, and all the invites have already gone out. All the guests need do is come and be guests. Period.

But what do they do? Well, despite the gracious, free invitation- they look a gift horse right straight in the mouth. One prefers his farm. Another, his business. And another- another literally kills the messenger, beating the king's servants and murdering them in cold blood. Now me- if I threw a party like this and this was the response. I'm not sure what I'd do- I'd rethink my Christmas card list for one. Mainly, I'd think more carefully about my invitations in the future, weeding out those I wasn't so sure about. The funny thing about this king is that this isn't how he reacts. This king doesn't act like I would at all. No, he starts out by inviting all his friends, and then, even after suffering rejection after rejection after rejection- he doesn't *narrow* his list, he does something very strange indeed. He radically *expands* it- telling his servants to go out and find whoever they can, good, bad, funny looking- doesn't matter- just tell them there's a party and everyone's invited.

And the servants do. They go out and they fill the joint with this motley collection of people all milling around eating and drinking with absolutely nothing in common except this mysterious, absurd king who invited them as well as the curiosity that led them to come out. Can you imagine what it looked like? Can you imagine the scene- prim soccer moms and angry animals rights activists; urbane metrosexuals in suits mixing with surly bag ladies muttering to themselves; Portlanders from both sides of the Willamette, and dare I say it...right wing Republicans and liberal Democrats all feasting from the same shrimp tree. It's a strange, wild, beautiful scene.

But it gets stranger, doesn't it. Most of us would have been thrilled if Matthew had stopped here. Most of us would have been challenged plenty enough if Matthew would have yelled "Cut!" and had the camera fade to black. We have enough trouble

imagining our own family members making it into the kingdom, much less all these other odd balls that give us the willies. But Matthew doesn't stop it here- he's got one more scene for us. One more really challenging scene- one that he got a bunch of angry letters over, I bet.

There in the midst of that party, this crazy king wades his way through the crowd, drinks in both hands, an enormous grin stretching from ear to ear. Now *this* is more like it, he thinks! *This-* is a party! And then wham! He runs right into this clod who is sticking out like a sore thumb- a man still in his street clothes, having refused the robes being handed out at the door, standard at such a gala event. "Friend- how did you make it in without a robe?" the king asks, wondering if maybe they ran out at the door. And the man just stares at him silent- silent as death. And seeing the look on the man's face the king knows just what to do, and has the man bound, gagged, and thrown out where he belongs. This- this is how Matthew ends the story.

And what the heck are we supposed to do with this? This isn't a church ending? This isn't very nice- didn't Matthew know the Bible was supposed to be all nice and sweet? And what's more, it's disturbing- this isn't how we want to think about the king- this isn't how we want to think about heaven. He seems so capricious- I mean throwing a man out because he's wearing the wrong clothes? It's like my first junior high all over again- where the clothes you wear pretty much determine who your friends will be. This isn't God, is it? This isn't Kumbaya. What's going on here?

Well, in order to answer this question I did a lot of work this week. I read a lot of different theologians and pored over those big commentaries I have in my office. And as the week progressed, I was getting more and more frustrated, because while all of these resources were good- none of them really seemed to get at how I was hearing the story. And then towards the end of the week, as I was beginning to get a little bit nervous- it hit me. And I realized all of a sudden that I had been looking in the wrong place. I realized the meaning of this parable for me wasn't in the great theologians or the commentaries- it turned out for me that the meaning lay hidden in a far less likely place- from an experience I once had in a bowling class I was forced to take in high school. That's right- bowling. You know, the great theologian Karl Barth once wrote that God can speak through Chinese communism or a dead dog if God wants to- so why not through bowling?

Well, I should probably explain how I ended up there in the first place. I think it all started with football. I was an early bloomer, and I've been about this height, 6 ft. tall ever since I hit the 7th grade. The coaches took one look at me and knew I would be just for football. And being somewhat eager to redeem whatever masculinity I could from a childhood of piano lessons and my shameful glee in my family's Frasier-esque sport of choice- badminton, I was ready to put on those mildewy, sweat stinking pads and make a new man of myself on the gridiron. And surprisingly, I really liked a lot of it. Oh, I really didn't know what I was doing- I'd only played unorganized ball and didn't really know what all the positions were about, but I was learning. And for the most part I was pretty good at it- the problem I ran into, the problem I just couldn't get around was how serious all the coaches seemed to be taking everything. How angry they would get at us-

these confused little junior high school boys who had just been thrown into a new school, actually expected to do real homework for the first time in our lives, and just beginning to know the wonderful, humiliating, tantalizing terror of girls. I mean really, even on our best days, there was only so much you could ask of us.

Well, one day I finally reached my breaking point. We were in a scrimmage, a practice game- our horrible side against their horrible side. And we did our best to make sure we didn't score a touchdown against ourselves or do anything incredibly embarrassing. And I remember there were just a few minutes left, and we were going to be released, when wham! Gigantic Juan DeLeon, a boy so big we wondered if there were twins inside his uniform fell backwards onto my wrist and hand which was lying twisted in a kind of a funny position on the ground. And I remember this searing pain and imagining my hand being like on those cartoons when Tom gets run over by a steam roller and he's all big and flat. And my coach comes running over- Coach Smith, this hairy little gorilla of a man who seemed to believe he was divinely sanctioned to get us ready for the pro-bowl. And I'm looking for support, I'm looking for sympathy, I'm looking to go home early. And ol' Coach Smith bends over me, "Hooooood," he said. "I don't see any blood. We've got a game to finish. Are we ready to get goin'?" And I stared at him in disbelief. "But my hand really hurts," I said meekly, "it might even be broken." "Broken?" he said taking my hand like it was a piece of New York strip and turning it over and poking at it. "Hoooood, what if this were the Superbowl? You wouldn't quit playing the Super Bowl just because you 'might have a break', would you?" Again, I stared at him, really wondering now if I was in an episode of the twilight zone. "But this isn't the Super Bowl," I said. "This isn't even a real game- it's just a

scrimmage. And we're just in junior high," I said. But it didn't work. He just stared blankly at me as I talked- blinking every once in a while. Earth was clearly not getting through to planet Smith. And so I came up with one of my typically kind, pastorally sensitive comment- "You all are nuts." And I walked off the field, never again, to don the Red and White of the Mighty Hurst Junior High Red Raiders.

It wasn't my finest moment- but it was an honest moment. And well, similar honest moments kept me from organized sports like this, until in High School, my lack of PE or Athletic credits finally caught up with me and my school counselor let me know that if I wanted to graduate, I was going to have to fix this- and the only way she could see to do it given my schedule was if I took bowling. 'Bowling?' I said, smirking. 'Bowling' counts as PE? Heck, I thought, Badminton was more athletic than bowling- *piano* is more athletic than bowling. But, seeing no other options I found myself destined for the world of rented shoes and some of the most interesting people I would ever have the chance to meet.

See, it turns out that bowling class was kind of a collection point for the oddest of high school's odd balls- every whimp, smoker, druggie, nerd, and anti-football revolutionary found themselves in bowling because it required the least effort of any PE class, and it was offered off campus, which provided my compatriots with ample opportunity to skip the rest of their classes, smoke, or do whatever it is they felt like away from the prying eyes of teachers and other authority figures. And it was in bowling that I met two people who I still carry with me- Scott, my randomly selected bowling partner, and Coach Debord, the poor guy stuck with trying to keep us derelicts in line.

Scott frightened me at first- he was tall, and his this long, thin wispy blond hair, and always wore these dark, dark t-shirts with arcane symbols and the names of bands I didn't know. Scott was quiet mostly. I knew he was a skater and that he smoked. What I didn't know was that he was also a poet, a musician, and an artist. Over time we got to know each other and he shared some of his poetry with me- even now I remember feeling what holy ground it was when he read something he had written- his hair cascading down in front of his sleepy eyes, his hands trembling a little as he nervously held his paper, and then finishing and looking at me, seeming to wonder if I would make fun, and the look of relief when I never did. He taught me other things, too. He told me all about his fascination with marijuana, a mysterious, exotic thing I'd only heard about- how he learned how to make a water bong out of those little pint sized milk cartons from school, and how he named one of them Dr. Squat. I tell you, Scott was extremely interesting to me- I had never really quite met anyone like him before. He was definitely *not* like the kids in my honors classes and my piano recitals- and I found myself fascinated.

But I also found myself conflicted. I was conflicted, because it turned out that the only coach I ever really liked, our bowling coach- Coach Debord, was someone Scott, for reasons I never fully learned, just loathed. Now, Coach Debord looked a lot like the other coaches we had- he wore these tight gym shorts that shared WAY too much with a school sweatshirt over top, still wore these tube socks that went out of style in the 70's, and sometimes made the unfortunate choice of coming with a sweat band wrapped around his head like a really, really tight blue terry cloth halo. And when I think about it- halo is a pretty good word for it. Because despite all of my negative experiences with coaches like Coach Smith to Coach Debord completely made up for this with a kind of

quiet, kindness, and what I can only describe as love for these kids that most coaches I knew wouldn't have even bothered to notice in passing in the hallway.

The thing that really impressed with me with Coach Debord is that he started the class telling the kids that he knew we weren't all just dying to learn bowling and that he understood that. He said further that he respected each of us there, assumed he had something to learn from each and every one of us, and that all he asked in return was that we would show up, do our best, and respect him in return. Further, he said there used to be a written test in this class as well as a performance test- but that he thought this was ridiculous and said in his class it would be real simple. If we showed up enough- we would pass. And if we had reasons that made it impossible to show up then to talk to him and he would figure something out. Other than that- we had to have fun. Well, I had never heard of such craziness, a coach who actually respected people, and a class that all you had to do was to show up, and I thought it was great. Scott, on the other hand- well Scott thought Coach Debord was just a hypocrite and worse than the other coaches because at least they didn't pretend to be nice. And it didn't take long for him to express these views to the Coach, and it didn't take long before Scott started missing class with alarming regularity.

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Now, back to the parable, I realize this parable is frightening because when we read it from the perspective of the silent stranger- the king looks erratic and cruel. This poor guy is just hanging out and we think just because he's not wearing a robe he's

thrown out? It sounds like a junior high parable- like we had better be behaved and dressed the right way, or else. The good news for us, however, is that the silent stranger is not the subject, the protagonist, of the drama. He's not the starting point. No, the subject of the parable, the real starting point, is the king. And when we take this into account, we see that the king remains consistent throughout the parable and the story begins to make a lot more sense. What does the king do over and over and over again in this parable- he invites. The king is the one who invites the original guests- and notice he *never* dis-invites them. They are the ones who choose not to partake. As one writer puts it: "Heaven is populated by nothing but forgiven sinners and hell is populated by nothing but forgiven sinners: the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world, not just of the chosen few...The difference between heaven and hell, accordingly, is simply that those in heaven accept the endless forgiveness, while those in hell reject it. Indeed, the precise hell of hell is its endless refusal to open the door to the reconciled and reconciling one standing forever on its porch knocking endlessly for permission to bring in the Supper of the Lamb." (Capon, p. 357) So then after the first invitees refuse to come, the king then invites the whole dang town- and everyone is welcome, provided that they all show up and enjoy themselves. And when the king comes to the man, asks him about the robe, and has him thrown out- but it isn't because he can't afford a suit. The robes are given away for free at the door at these events commentators tell us. No, the man is thrown out because of his obstinate silence- his absolute refusal to join in the fun. And if it's one thing this King, this Lord of the Dance can't seem to tolerate- is people who take themselves too seriously and refuse to enter into relationship and spoil the party for everyone else. One writer puts it this way: "Because the man would not bring himself to

relate to the king in any way- all the reassurances the king might have given him remain unheard. And so Jesus only brings down on him the sentence of condemnation that he has already invoked on himself.” (p. 463) And later: “Free grace, dying love, and unqualified acceptance might as well be a fifteen-foot crocodile the way we respond to it.” (Capon, p. 457)

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And sadly, this is exactly what happened to my friend, Scott back in bowling. Despite attempt after attempt on Coach Debord’s part to reach out to Scott, to offer ways he could make up the classes he missed, even calling Scott’s house a few times- Scott would have none of it. He was convinced Coach Debord was just a jerk, and he would have none of this man’s kindness. And while it might be a stretch to call it outer darkness, Scott did fail the class- and he believed Debord’s willingness to fail him just proved him right in the end. Of course it didn’t prove him right- it just proved the Coach was honest. Had Scott shown up to see, to really see, the concern written across Debord’s face on the days he didn’t show- he might have learned what the rest of us already knew- that rough edges and all, Scott was a really fantastic, wonderful, great kid, and we all missed out when he wasn’t there.

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My friends, this is a parable for you and for me. For the most part you and I don’t belong with the first wave of invitees in the story- for the most part we don’t completely

reject God's invitation. Heck, we got up this morning and came out hoping to hear something of the good news of God. And, I'd say we Presbyterians, God's frozen people as we're known, aren't really much like that second wave of invitees who come belly up to the bar and revel and dance in God's grace with a kind of joyous abandon. No. No, we're more like that strange, silent man- we show up to the party but we're not quite sure we want to relax and put on our robe. We are a people who know about God's grace intellectually, but we don't always experience it in our hearts and in our souls. We are a people who sometimes do a much better job of forgiving others than we do ourselves. Oh, we're more like Scott- a little wary of people who seem too kind to be true, perhaps thinking if only they really knew us, really knew what kind of people we were- why then they wouldn't be so loving. So, we keep our distance a little bit- from others, and from God.

Beloved, the good news this morning is that God's ways are not our ways. The good news this morning is that while we find ourselves with this silent man in the outer darkness of our lives at times, this ludicrous, party throwing king hasn't given up on us and keeps sending us invitations. In fact, all he seems to have time for is to invite one and all to the bottomless wine barrels of his never ending wedding banquet- the only price of admission being that we don't look down our nose at the other crazies he's let in, and that whatever we do- we throw our heads back and laugh at this ridiculous, impossible, beautiful banquet where no one is worthy and everyone, everyone is having the time of their lives. Hear the good news this day, my friends, and come in from the cold. The party is already going on. **Amen.**