

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Emmanuel Episcopal Church

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The parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel is, putting it mildly, disturbing. It is exceptionally violent in its language and in its substance. To be honest, I was tempted to preach on the Psalm. I thought I would find a lot there to say in the middle of where we are on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2020, over nine months into the Covid 19 pandemic: a raging horror mismanaged and deadly, compounded by political shouting and raging, by isolation from people we love and people we like to be with at work, school, restaurants, and parties, by racism, by hatred and divisiveness, nonsense and blather and fear. The celebratory beginning of Psalm 106 is a counter to our temptation to anger and despair: "Hallelujah! Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for his mercy endures forever." But despite the appeal of those words, something kept pulling me back to this story about how the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet. And as I lived with the parable for several days, something of hope began to emerge and I'd like to share that hope with you.

Specifically, there are two questions unique to this parable. Why does Jesus tell it this way, with violence and murder and outer darkness, weeping and teeth

gnashing? And what is going on with that poor guest who shows up without a wedding robe?

The story starts out innocently enough: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” What a nice first sentence: this will be a story about a king, happy with his son and his son’s bride, eager to share his happiness and good fortune with his loyal and loving subjects, eager to share his bounty and his love. But immediately a problem emerges, and it is a big problem: the invited guests won’t come to the banquet. They don’t bother to give an excuse: the story tells us simply that they won’t come. Obviously the king has trouble believing what his servants report, so he sends out other servants with what amounts to a plea: “Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to my wedding banquet.” This is almost begging: please come. Please! And how odd that a king would have to beg his subjects to come receive his hospitality, and how even odder that a king would be willing to do so. But the invited guests still refuse; and while the more peaceful of them simply go away to their farms or their businesses, the more violent among them beat up the servants and then – unbelievably – they kill them. And the king responds by doing two things. He destroys those murderers and burns their city down. Well, he is the king and he has the power to exact revenge – or is it justice? - and we are probably thinking in our hearts that they

deserved what they got! So the king's first response doesn't surprise us. But then he does something that is surprising: he sends his servants out into the streets to "invite everyone you find to the wedding feast." No exceptions: everyone! And that is what the servants do: "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."

The story doesn't end there, but let's pause and look at another version.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story that is similar but with different details and with a very different tone. Reading from Luke 14: 15 – 24:

And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. <sup>14:16</sup>But Jesus said unto him, A certain man made a great supper; and he bade many: <sup>14:17</sup>and he sent forth his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for *all* things are now ready. <sup>14:18</sup>And they all with one *consent* began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it; I pray thee have me excused. <sup>14:19</sup>And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them; I pray thee have me excused. <sup>14:20</sup>And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. <sup>14:21</sup>And the servant came, and told his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame. <sup>14:22</sup>And the servant said, Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room. <sup>14:23</sup>And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain *them* to come in, that my house may be filled. <sup>14:24</sup>For I say unto you, that none of those men that were bidden shall taste of my supper.

So in Luke there is no king, no son, no wedding feast. A man prepares a great supper and invites "many" and everyone refuses, but each has an excuse: I need to go inspect the field I just bought, or I need to check out the oxen I just

purchased, or I just got married and need to work on this new relationship. These people just have other things to do that for them are more important than the supper they are invited to. They don't mistreat the messengers, and they certainly don't kill them. They just say "No" when invited to eat bread in the Kingdom of God. And that is sufficiently awful. The host, though angry, doesn't punish them. Their punishment - their choice - is that they don't get the banquet. The host sends out for other guests, specifically for those who are peripheral members of society: the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame, and when they fail to fill up his house, he sends his servants out to drag (the word used is "constrain") everyone, no exceptions, to come to the supper. All are bidden to the party, no one left out; all you, I – we – have to do is say "Yes." In the Kingdom of God the only losers are those who say "No. I do not want the Kingdom of God. I want to look after my oxen."

The story in Matthew says what this story says, but it is different. And that brings me to my two questions: why the harsh tone in Matthew and why the man without the wedding robe?

Last week Laura Yordy reflected on Jesus' parable about the wicked tenants who killed the vineyard owner's son. She observed that Jesus's words are not meek and mild and that his story of these evil tenants and the landlord who exacted righteous vengeance is violent and disturbing. Laura noted that Jesus is angry and

that His anger is a product of His situation: It is Holy Week, the last days of Jesus' life. Jesus has finally entered Jerusalem and He is confronting the civil and religious authorities in person and they are plotting to kill Him. I agree with Laura. Jesus is angry. Last week's and today's parables both show Jesus speaking under incredibly stressful circumstances. He is at last face to face with the authorities and they are baiting him, taunting him, and plotting how to get him away from the supportive crowds so they can kill him. When he looks at this part of his audience, how can Jesus not be angry? How can he not describe the wronged king coming to destroy them and burn their city? In contrast, the audience in the Luke story are guests themselves at a dinner, and Jesus' parable is in response to an affable observation by a friendly fellow guest, and it is a long time before Jesus goes to Jerusalem to be arrested, tortured, and killed.

So the first part of today's parable is directed primarily at the authorities who have killed the prophets in the past and who have rejected what Jesus in a recent parable has called the chief cornerstone. But Jesus is also talking to his followers, some of whom have been with him for three years or more. And to them he wants to give a different message. From the time of his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus has been preaching the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. By his teaching and his actions he has spent three years showing his followers the kingdom of heaven, demonstrating with his words and his life what it is to inhabit

the kingdom of heaven, and now he has only two or three days left. In addition to the anger in his voice directed towards the murdering authorities, I hear in this parable Jesus' awareness of the shortness of time. I hear something like desperation as he speaks to his followers: I need you to understand, he seems to say, I don't have much time, and I need you to understand. "In the middle of this world of violence and murder," he says, "there is this banquet given by a king." The banquet represents an alternative world, a world of reality where love binds God to us and us to God and each of us to one another. This is the world where the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake: all these are blessed. It is a world where we are made perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect; a world where we are healed, forgiven, loved, where we all receive the same no matter what hour we started work in the vineyard. A world where death gives way to life. It is in fact the world Jesus taught his disciples to pray for: Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven. And this world is like a banquet. And we have an invitation! Good or bad though we be, we are invited to this wedding feast. This is the vision Jesus wants his disciples – and us – to see. This is God's promise, the source, the ground of our hope. And the first part of the parable ends with what seems the conclusion of the story: "So the wedding hall was filled with guests."

But then the king notices a guest who is not wearing a wedding robe. He confronts the under-dressed guest and asks how he got in without a wedding robe, and when the man cannot answer (“He was speechless”), the king has him bound and thrown into outer darkness. The harsh judgment which killed the murderers and burned their city seems to continue even here, in the midst of the banquet to which everyone was invited. If the banquet – freely offered to all – is Jesus’ symbol for the Kingdom of Heaven, why is this man rejected? Where is the hope here?

For me, the story of this man does suggest hope, though in a paradoxical way, which is consistent with the rest of the parable. Let’s ask what the robe represents and what not wearing the robe says to the king. And let’s assume that this man – say it is you or me – owns a wedding robe. Everyone else seems to have had no trouble acquiring one. Some commentators have suggested that robes may have been available at the door for the taking like masks at the grocery store. Maybe. Or we can just suppose that in this symbolic world everyone has a robe hanging in the closet waiting for an invitation. The robe is like the lamps kept trimmed by the bridesmaids in a parable Jesus will tell in another day or two. So the question becomes “Why did this man not put on his robe?” I think that in this parable to put on a wedding robe is to accept the invitation to the banquet with joy and love, and not to put it on is to say “I am here but I am not really sure I want to

be here, or should be here.” Unlike the people who gave outright refusals and even murdered the messengers, this man has come to the banquet, but he is doubtful about attending. And why would he not want to be here? Or why would he think he should not be here? Well, there are a number of reasons. And some of them may be reasons why we ourselves resist joining in the banquet even when we are in the banquet hall. He may just not be able to believe that God’s love is a free gift. After all, nothing in life is free. There must be a catch. It is too good to be true. Perhaps he feels unworthy to be here. Surely he must need to do some good things to deserve being here. He has never experienced unconditional love, and therefore it probably doesn’t exist. And who are all these other people? Perhaps, the man has been thinking that the kingdom of heaven would be more an intimate tete-a-tete between him and God, or at most with God and a few other people who agree about religion and politics and what matters in life. People like him. He just can’t accept this invitation fully. It is too hard to receive God’s love. So he will come to the banquet but he will hold back and observe; he just can’t accept it and participate. Not fully.

But in this story partial participation in the kingdom of heaven isn’t possible: the alternative is what Jesus describes as outer darkness.

And what is that darkness? Isn’t it the darkness of our refusal to enjoy the light of the banquet hall? Isn’t it the darkness we choose for ourselves when we

shake our heads and say “No”? And it has very little to do with what we call sin: the people gathered here at the banquet are both bad and good. All those robed people have just one thing in common: they have responded to God’s love by saying yes and by dressing up and eating and drinking their fill, popping corks and passing the gravy. (I am going to depart from the stark nature of the narrative to say I like to imagine the rejected guest – who is also the rejecting guest – comes back to the banquet. All he has to do is put on his robe.)

So the hope that I find in this grim parable is this. Even at the extreme crisis of his life, Jesus, days before he is to suffer and die, continues to preach that God offers us as a free gift – as pure grace - a banquet the likes of which we cannot imagine. I think that as we too deal with our own crises, personal and society-wide, Jesus’ assurance speaks to us through the story: Despite the darkness God offers us the kingdom of heaven. And he offers it again and again. And we don’t have to do anything to deserve it. We just have to accept it. We just have to let God feed us.

My prayer for us all is that God’s grace empower us to accept His love, to put on our wedding robes, and to fill ourselves with his food.

“Hallelujah! Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for his mercy endures forever.” Amen.