

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

“This parable seems just plain nasty.”

“This story is a mess.”

“Let just admit it: this is an ugly parable.”

Just a few of the helpful observations in commentaries I’ve read this past week.

It’s helpful for me – as preacher this morning – to read that others find today’s gospel “challenging.” And it may be helpful for you to hear that as well.

Down through the centuries, the story we just heard Jesus tell has been treated as an allegory – each element a symbol for someone or something else:

- The king is God;
- The son is Jesus;
- The first invited guests are those who refuse to celebrate Jesus’ coming among them;
- The first groups of slaves are the prophets;
- War – troops sent in to destroy enemies and burn their cities – is God’s judgement;
- The last group of slaves are the Christian missionaries;
- And we are the ones invited to take our place when others rejected the gospel.

That seems, to many, the clear meaning of the story Jesus tells, uncomfortable as it may seem.

But that cannot be what it means for us.

In the first place, that cannot be what it means because of what it says about God. If this is a holy allegory, then the “god” we’re left with is petty and vindictive, easily provoked and quickly enraged when the people do not show the respect that is due.

And further, that cannot be the meaning of Jesus’ story because of what it allows here on earth.

If we imagine that God is just like the king in Jesus’ story – it does violence to human society at large. Normalizing depictions of God as angry and violent opens the door for normalizing the anger and violence of human rulers.

And this has real world implications. For it may well prove to be a short and deadly step from rulers who engage in such outbursts – or merely tacitly permit them – to citizens who decide to do the same.

At its absolute worst, this very story has been used to legitimize the deaths of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany, troops sent to destroy them, to pillage their homes and burn their cities.

And this week, following the local and national news, this should be chilling to us, as well. This past Thursday, 13 men were arrested for plotting to kidnap and possibly kill the governor of Michigan as part of a violent attempt to overthrow the state government.

Much closer to home, violence broke out between protesters and demonstrators from both sides of the political divide here in Bend this past week.

What was once abhorrent behavior in the public sphere is now on the nightly news. “A small, but meaningful, number of Americans believe that violence is the only answer to the country’s political divisions.”ⁱ

So let’s be clear, whatever Jesus is getting at, he cannot be saying – here in the 22nd chapter of Matthew (and so near the end of his public ministry) – that he’s changed his mind about God. Jesus condemned violent retaliation in his teaching all his life. He died on a cross rather than strike out at his persecutors. He told us and showed us that God is love.

It is a moral imperative for us to conclude that God is not just like the king in Jesus’ story.

What helps us get there, I think, is to note that Matthew explicitly tells us in the opening words of this morning’s gospel that this is a parable. And the very first words he puts into Jesus’ mouth underscore the point:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

This is a parable, not an allegory. And parables are, by their very nature, open-ended and subject to interpretation – their meaning not always immediately clear. We are best instructed by parables when we take time with them ... when we ponder them, when we question them.

Consider, for example, the parable Jesus told once about a person who goes knocking on a neighbor’s door, asking for bread to serve a guest who arrived in the middle of the night. The neighbor refuses at first, and only relents and gets out of bed because the person knocking doesn’t stop.ⁱⁱ

Or, again, there was the parable about the widow who kept pestering an unjust judge, begging him to give her justice. And he does in the end, not because he sees the rightness of her cause, but because he grows weary of her continually coming after him.ⁱⁱⁱ

The point of these parables is not that God is like that sleepy neighbor who has to be cajoled or a self-serving judge who has to be harassed. No, the point of those parables is a call to persevere in prayer, to do what's needed to show hospitality, and to persist in the cause of justice.

In this morning's parable, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet ..." We do well to ask, "exactly *how* is 'the kingdom of heaven' – God's dream for how we can take part in creating a little heaven here on earth – like that?"

God is not petty or vindictive. Jesus could not possibly have meant that. And we must not allow the story to mean that. We're obliged, then, to wonder what Jesus *did* mean?

So far as I can tell, what we're left with is the image of a God who desperately longs for us to understand life as a celebration to which we are all invited.

That sounds – at least it sounds to me – like an echo of the sorts of things Jesus really did say about God in everything he taught. It sounds like an echo of what Jesus showed us in his life. He ate with tax collectors and sinners AND with the scribes and the Pharisees. He spoke with men AND with women. He welcomed children.

This story makes the same point that Jesus made in the whole of his life:

Then [the king] said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

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.

I think Jesus' story intends for us to see that life is supposed to be a celebration for all God's people. Surely it's no small point that when the wedding hall is filled, it includes "both good and bad" among the guests. However we define ourselves, whether we think we're pretty good *or* we deem ourselves not good enough, we are invited – and we are needed – to help fill the wedding hall of God. And so, too, is everyone else, whatever we may think of them.

But what about the violence in the story?

Since I've disallowed the notion that God is petty and vindictive, there must be another explanation. And I think it's simply taking seriously what's at stake here. It matters whether we respond to the invitation or make up flimsy excuses; it is a matter of life and death for us.

If life is supposed to be a celebration for all God's children, then a failure to respond, a failure to celebrate this life that is ours, is a kind of death we bring upon ourselves. As Robert Capon once put it, "Outside the party there is no life at all." ^{iv}

And that's the sense I make of the poor schmuck at the end, as well. We have to assume, don't we, that he must have had at least a moment to dress for the occasion. After all, everyone else at the party is dressed properly. And when the king asks about his lacking a "wedding robe," he's left "speechless." He has no defense to offer, nothing to say for himself.

Showing up, but not dressing for the party, is not so very different from declining the invitation in the first place. It's not enough to RSVP and then just show up. You have to want to be there. You have to join the celebration. Otherwise, you might as well be left in the dark.

And this is where it all comes home to you and me.

Parables invite us to imagine something new. And they invite us to respond, as well.

Most parables leave us with a question. In this case – though it is never said in so many words – I think the question is whether we will respond to the invitation to see life in this world as a celebration for us to share with all God's children?

And we should admit that this might feel like a stretch for some of us some of these days:

- In the midst of a pandemic, when we are cut off from one another and self-isolating at home, how can we enjoy the party that is life?
- In the midst of political divisions that seem to threaten mutual respect and human dignity, how can we celebrate all God's children, "both good and bad"?

Well ... how can we NOT?!

It may well be that we need to respond to this invitation now more than ever, not in spite of the challenges of these days, but because of them. It is a matter of life and death – and too many are choosing death.

But WE have been invited to make a little heaven here on earth.

And that is what we must do.

So let me offer one modest suggestion. It's a suggestion I've shared already with a few of you. Meaghan Kelly is an Episcopal priest, and the director of a church camp program back East. Last month, after six months of isolation, she had a chance to get back together with some old friends and colleagues. It was wonderful, she said, except for the fact that they couldn't hug. They were obliged to keep safe distance from one another.

And it was hard. She said she felt as if one of her "love languages" had been taken away.

She was referring to a 1992 book called *The Five Love Languages*. You don't need to have read the book to understand how important physical touch is for some folks; it's their preferred "love language." So for some, it is painful right now not to be able to hug (and be hugged). That's why Meaghan Kelly said that it felt like one of her "love languages" had been taken away.

But upon later reflection, she concluded that she was only half-right. One way of showing love had been taken away, but it doesn't mean she cannot love; it only means she has to find other ways to show love – now more than ever. She has to do the hard work – though it's her second choice – of using another of the five love languages. "We can't hug," she says, "and that's lousy. So it might be time to ramp up the words of affirmation. Or the acts of service. Or the gifts."^v

It's an almost trivial example. I offer it merely as one modest attempt to encourage us to imagine how we might respond to the invitation of this morning's gospel.

COVID-19 and divisive politics seem to make it harder to see life as a celebration right now.

But that's only half-right. Some will use the pandemic and strains in the fabric of our world as excuses to give themselves permission to hold back. But in truth, they are the very reasons why it is more important than ever for us to strive ever harder – in all of the love languages we have at our disposal – to bring a little heaven here to earth.

The world may not much resemble what we would have imagined – or hoped for or preferred – for the second weekend in October. But life is still good. It is still a gift. And we are invited to make of it a celebration for all God's children.

ⁱ David Leonhart, "The Morning" (for Friday, October 9) @ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/briefing/gretchen-whitmer-nobel-peace-prize-hurricane-delta-your-friday-briefing.html>.

ⁱⁱ Luke 11:5-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 18:1-8.

^{iv} Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1989), p. 122.

^v Meaghan Kelly @ <https://strangersbutonce.blog/2020/09/16/words-of-affirmation/>.