

Message for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (10/11/2020)

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Matthew 22:1-14

One of the things I love most about Christianity is the food. It's also one of the reasons why the Gospel of Luke is my favorite story of Jesus. Throughout Luke's version, Jesus is either on his way to a meal, enjoying a meal, or coming from a meal.¹ Food abounds as a sign of God's rich provision and the joy of gathering. But, Luke is certainly not alone in his emphasis on meals, and especially shared meals. The thread that runs through today's assigned scripture from Isaiah, Psalm 23, and Matthew is also the image of the feast.

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples / a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, / of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. / And God will destroy on this mountain / the shroud that is cast over all peoples, / the sheet that is spread over all nations; / God will swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25).

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; / you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over. / Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, / and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23).

And finally, from our Gospel: "[The king] said to his slaves... 'Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' [And they] went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matthew 22).

¹ Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*, 14.

These scriptures are distinct; still, they all cast a similar vision: **the finest foods and wines spread before all people regardless of merit; a feast that defies all enemies, even death itself; God's abundant goodness on full display at the end of the age. Now, that's a biblical promise to relish in times of rejoicing and weeping alike.**

But, the richness of the promise is punctuated by troubling details in the text, too, namely in today's Gospel. These elements aren't likely to sit well alongside the main course, so we may prefer to leave them on the plate. But, refusing to engage difficult aspects of scripture won't make them go away. They're part of the meal. Thus, Eugene Peterson encourages readers of the Bible to acknowledge its complexity: "Eat this book," he writes, "it will be sweet as honey in your mouth; but it will also be bitter to your stomach. You can't reduce [scripture] to what you can handle; you can't domesticate [it] to what you are comfortable with."²

Jesus' parable of the wedding feast is a case in point. Even as it alludes to God's expansive welcome and indiscriminate generosity, it also depicts God in an unfavorable light. Is God the kind of king that reacts to a snub with outrageous violence, letting his son's wedding dinner get cold while he wages war against those who've declined to show up? Is God the kind of king that burns his own city to the ground in order to destroy his neighbors? Is God the kind of king that inspects his guests' attire, seizing and expelling anyone who doesn't meet his high standards (despite the late and unexpected invitation)? If this is God's nature, then the joy of the great and promised feast is dampened a little, isn't it?

² Quoted by Jana Riess, in *Flunking Sainthood*, 39.

This parable is traditionally read as an allegory, with the king standing in for God. But, in light of the king's portrayal, perhaps we shouldn't draw too close a parallel. His impulsiveness and severity are absurd enough to remind us that a story doesn't necessarily mirror the truth so much as it evokes it. To quote one interpreter, "Realism [in the parable] is sacrificed to theological meaning."³ That is to say, the king both is and is not God.⁴

As we contend with the king's shocking violence and strange hospitality, it's helpful, first of all, to keep Matthew's context in mind. Many interpreters believe, for instance, that the image of the burning city reflects the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire in the year 70, a devastating event for Israel that is in plain view as Matthew writes his Gospel. Moreover, Matthew's community of Jewish Jesus-followers is marginal and likely alienated from their synagogue, which is another significant loss.

This speculation might allow us to have some empathy for Matthew's version of the story, recognizing that there's fresh trauma there.⁵ How does the evangelist make sense of the changing landscape of Judaism at the end of the first century and his community's place in it? What does it mean to be invited to God's great banquet in light of the terror and turmoil all around them? What kind of responsibility does discipleship imply?

That last question leads us to examine the jarring conclusion to Jesus' parable, the expulsion of the wedding guest on account of his failure to dress for the occasion. It's a bit unjust, isn't it? How could this guest have known he would be invited? Why

³ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 418.

⁴ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 433.

⁵ "Sermon Brainwave" #746, www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1302.

should he have been prepared at a moment's notice? Yet, if the message of the parable trumps its logic,⁶ then the significance of the wedding robe can't be overlooked.

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," the apostle Paul writes, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."⁷ **God's invitation to the feast implies a commitment: to be clothed with Christ, to put on the garment of our baptism as a sign that we've been changed.⁸ God's love has made us lovers; and if our cups are running over, then they overflow to others.**

So, come to the banquet, friends. Come at the invitation of the one who is both the host and the meal itself. But, don't forget to dress for the occasion! Clothe yourselves with the love of Christ, and receive his life given and poured out for you, a feast of rich food and wine. Then, filled with the good things of God, go feed the world with a word of hope, the promise of the feast to come, where all peoples will gather at God's invitation, where none will hunger and thirst, where God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

⁶ Richard E. Spalding, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 164.

⁷ Colossians 3:12-14.

⁸ Galatians 3:27; Romans 13:14.