

October 15, 2023-Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction to themes of the day-

Today, I'm borrowing a meme I saw on facebook that comes from the Clergy Coaching group. "It's one thing to have the cross as the symbol of our faith. It's another thing to live our lives in the pattern of the cross." As we hear the parable of the wedding banquet, those words might be useful.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:1-14

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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. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again 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.' 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10Those 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, 12and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13Then 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.' 14For many are called, but few are chosen."

Sermon:

It's hard for me to even visualize the violence in a parable when there's so much actual violence in the world. The way forward comes as I'm reminded of advertising for a horror movie some fifty years back, "It's only a movie...it's only a

movie”. The story Jesus tells is only a story...a parable. That doesn’t mean we don’t tread carefully.

*We confuse parables with fables that contain a nugget of wisdom for how we conduct ourselves. Parables are not Jesus’ calling out Mr, Twinkletoes in the fifth row to tell him to shape up. Parables belong to and in communities.

*We confuse parables with allegories where each detail stands for something else and that the likenesses hold up. Spoiler, if the king—the one who acts like a bouncer enforcing the dress code—is supposed to be God in this story, I don’t think I’d want to encounter such a God in a dark alley let alone a party.

Parables are riddles and riddled with absurdity. Parables are designed to scandalize and subvert with the goal of shifting hearts and minds.

In the absurdity department, the wedding garment story is a whopper. Nobody blows off an invitation from the king to a party. Besides hitting the free eats table and sipping expensive bevies, you might get to rub shoulders with the mucky mucks. After all, a big do serves as occasion to show off that frock you bought at the Bay.

Being persona non grata at the party of the decade would ruin someone’s social standing. There is NO WAY a guest would send regrets by shooting the messenger.

In the ‘real world’ back then, hosting and being invited to parties facilitated social climbing...or sometimes being chucked from the cool kids’ table. Inviting anybody with a pulse and focusing particularly on people who are used to being left out because of disability or illness or poverty...that’s just not done. Absurd! Then there’s Jesus who draws fire from the religious establishment for befriending all sorts of people including those who would NEVER get an invitation to banquets.

Prophets imagined banquets as God’s sharing abundance with us and as ways for the wealthy to share with everyone. As we’ve noted, banquets in Jesus time became more like a reality show where people compete for status and esteem. Maybe the parable knocks against ladders we try to put up when God seems more interested in open doors, open gates, and bridges.

Time to put this parable in its place....Fresh off the palm frond parade into Jerusalem and that Temple kerfuffle, Jesus speaks to religious elites who reject his claim and his vision of the realm of God.

Jesus hasn't ditched the beatitudes blessing the poor and those who mourn.

He hasn't jettisoned images of the realm of God as being like seeds, or pearls, or lost sheep.

Jesus hasn't abandoned a realm where inclusion is so inclusive we just can't stand it. If the riff-raff get to be at this party, then does that mean I'm not special anymore?

Remember that parables and Gospel are meant for communities and crowds. Parables signal that Jesus operates on a cosmic scale. Jesus' invitation to put on the party clothes— all ready and waiting for us —might just mean tossing aside our narrow views of God's vast mercy. Amen.