

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season October 11, 2020 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost

*We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Remember next week – special worship service and congregational meeting to consider extending the pastoral call to the candidate recommended by Council – **Sunday, October 18 – worship begins at 10:00 am, meeting follows after the service.** There will be specific instructions about viewing the service and participating in the congregational meeting remotely.*

Lessons for Pentecost 19

Psalm 23, Phil. 4:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

bring them, the good, the bad, into the banquet hall.

Another week further into Pentecost, further into Matthew's Gospel, further into Jesus' mission that will take him to the Cross. Another week to ponder Jesus' mission, to ponder the resistance to Jesus' mission, to ponder a sharply-worded parable of Jesus directed to his opponents. Another week, another difficult parable.

This week, it is not a landowner who faces difficulties, it is a king. A king who cannot get people, presumably friends and acquaintances, to come to the wedding banquet he has so extravagantly prepared for his son. Jesus gives no explanation for the guests' not coming other than they have farms or businesses to attend to. They refuse to come; some mistreat and even kill the servants who delivered the invitation.

Once again, we find a situation in a parable of Jesus that is hard to explain or understand. There must be a 'back story' about this king, or the son, some circumstance that might help us understand. I suppose that could be the subject of another parable – just not this one. As we ponder this parable, we remember that it is supposed to be a parable of the kingdom. It is difficult, though, to see the heavenliness of this particular ruler whose next action is to destroy the murderous invitees along with their town.

Now, if Jesus is not going to give us the back story, I will not speculate further. Instead, let's move on. In the next scene, the king has a new order for the servants – forget those who slighted me and my invitation – just go out and find guests for the banquet. Go out into the streets, bring them, the good, the bad, into the banquet hall.. Wow! A king who is deviating from the Royal Rules of Etiquette – inviting non-royals, inviting people not on the A-List, indeed, not on the B- or C- Lists! This king will have a full banquet hall for the feast he has planned! What a great scene this is – street people, people who could have never imagined a fancy meal, the delicacies of a royal feast - they have been brought into the banquet.

We have already forgotten those who rebuffed the first invitation as we imagine the crowd gathered around the tables, being served rich foods by others. But this relentless parable of Jesus will not allow us to remain focused on this scene. The king arrives at the full banquet hall and notices that there is a guest without a wedding robe. He missed that **'patrons must wear a jacket'** sign by the entrance. The sign that is usually by closet with a rack of jackets available for those who arrived without one. This one guest, who has violated the wedding banquet norm, becomes the focus of the king, instead of the hall that is now full with guests. The joy of the celebration is destroyed by the picture of the guest being taken out to the place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

Okay then, where did we catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven in this disturbing parable of Jesus? Aren't parables supposed to offer easy access to a teaching about God? God's

kingdom? God's grace or mercy? I looked at several commentaries on this parable – they had many interpretations, many directions to go with the parable – on this they all agreed: there is no easy access to a teaching about God in the parable.

So, instead of trying to explain this parable today, I will use the parable to consider the question: How do we get people to our banquet table? This was a question of the king. Although the king did not have to exercise any finesse or tact or grace to do this – he simply used the power of his office. Maybe a better question for me to ask: How do we help people to want to be at our banquet table?

The opening video to the worship today, which some did not see, is basically a picture of my home dining room. Our dining room table has been set by Jean. She loves to set a nice table; it is a part of her sense of hospitality. As I mentioned in that video, we, like so many, have not been able to fill the seats at our table in these days of COVID. Don't all of us have a list of missed banquets, dinners and meals, wedding, anniversary, birthday and holiday celebrations that would have included people sitting at our table – a dining room table, a picnic table, a kitchen table – conversing, laughing, sharing. It did not take us too long into the pandemic for us to realize how easily it had been for us to take such moments for granted. Our staff was joking this past week, saying 2021 would be a make-up year, but there would not be enough days to make up all the moments and events that we missed.

At the heart of this parable is a king who wants people to join his celebration – the wedding of his son. While we may not identify with many of the actions taken by the king, we can identify with his heart, his heart to want others to share table fellowship with him. We are headed into holidays that often include table fellowship. I saw a COVID newsletter with a question: could a person plan an extended family gathering for Thanksgiving if they all agreed to quarantine two weeks beforehand? Yes, the heart to be at table with others is real!

Maybe this relates to that renegade guest who refused to wear the wedding robe and gets tossed out of the banquet. While we have a heart to gather around the table for fellowship, we want to share that fellowship with people who share this same heart. The guest who rejects the wedding robe is saying, "I will come, I will sit at the table, but on my own terms." The king's reaction is harsh, but the king understands that this type of attitude will disrupt the table fellowship.

I think of many families today that decide to come together around a table for family fellowship and sharing. It is likely in our divided country that not all family members will share the same political views. We understand or we have learned that a dinner conversation will not likely change a person's views and can often lead to discussions that disrupt the table fellowship – maybe end the table fellowship. To avoid this, many families, many family members are willing to wear the family robe when they come to the table and realize for the sake of the family fellowship, they will not share our political views at this moment, on this occasion.

This observation takes me to the reading from Paul. He is wrapping up his incredibly inspiring letter to the congregation in Philippi. Today, we heard those wonderful words, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus." But before we get to those words, we read some words we may have glossed over: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord... I ask you loyal companions to help these women." Paul understands that here is some contention or quarrel between two members of this congregation. Paul is concerned about the fellowship in this congregation that is threatened by the differences between the two women.

We do not know if Paul knew of Jesus' parable today or if Paul knew about the king who summarily tossed the banquet guest for not having the right wardrobe. Paul made no suggestion to throw the women out of the congregation. Instead, Paul speaks directly to the two women, "I urge you. - "I urge you Euodia, I urge you Syntyche." and then he enlists the congregation to help them be of one mind – *one mind in Jesus*. They may have been of different minds about a ministry of the congregation, they may have been of different minds about a decision of leadership in the congregation. They can keep those different views. But for Paul, it is important to remind them of the mind of Christ that unites them. Paul knows they have a mind for Christ – he cites their work in the congregation. He makes his gentle admonition to both of them, to all the congregation, wear the wardrobe, put on the mind of Christ as you take your place in the fellowship of the congregation.

Paul may not have known the king of Jesus' parable, but he did know Jesus. Paul strived to keep his heart and mind in Jesus. Jesus who gathered his own at a special banquet. On the night before he offered himself on the Cross, he offered himself to them in bread and wine – this is 'for you' he assured them. He offered himself to all – all twelve, Peter the denier, Judas the betrayer, the others who would quickly scatter leaving their wardrobes behind.

Jesus took on the mantle of the Cross. He would go on to his death and then his resurrection, so that his banquet hall would be open. Yes, our God has a heavenly banquet in mind, so our God sent the Son to prepare the banquet, to call people to be the banquet, indeed, to be the banquet. The banquet that welcomes all, guests from far and wide. The banquet described by the Psalmist: *You prepare a table before me ... surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*. The banquet, as Luther says, that offers sumptuous food: 'forgiveness of sin, life and salvation.' The banquet that we, sisters and brothers in Christ, have already experienced. Our gracious God has given us the wardrobe, a heart and mind - for this banquet.

AMEN