

Matthew 22:1-14

18th Sunday after Pentecost/Year A

October 12, 2014

“Come to the Kingdom party”

Today we celebrate the dedication of our new narthex. Take a few moments to look around, to experience the beauty of this place. The many different woods speak of diversity. Light bathes these old walls – 124 years old!– and pours in from the new windows in the narthex, blanketing us with the sense of peace and sanctuary. Old and new come together for the Eucharistic feast. This is a safe place to be exactly who you are, and to be transformed, energized by both renewal and tradition.

It’s time to reflect on why we have done this narthex project, and what we are going to do now. How does it speak of our understanding of the Christian life? Part of our congregation’s answer is contained in the goals of our Mutual Ministry Plan: our commitment to,

Make a conscious effort to meet and engage our neighbors and explore how we might live as an *inter-dependent* community.

This is more than a renovation of our banquet hall for the Eucharistic feast. This is an invitation intended to engage our neighbors and live into community.

The stories of the golden calf and the wedding banquet provide ample material for reflection.

There are a number of ways to read scripture – today’s readings remind us that the Bible can be true without being *literally* true. The great narratives of the Bible are not factual reports – their truth does not depend on the ‘facts’ as if they were CNBC or Fox News. The stories were told and retold over the millenia because of the meaning the people attached to them.

We may think of these stories as symbolic or metaphoric. The language that works best for me is ‘parabolic’. Parable has the same root word. A parable is a made-up story, with a truth behind it; Jesus was a master creator of parables. ‘Parabolic’ suggests an over-arching meaning, truth that the story points to or enfolds. Marcus Borg in his newest book, *Convictions*, calls this the ‘more than factual’ and the ‘less than factual’ meaning. Both more than factual, and less than factual meaning. Parabolic.

Last Sunday we heard how Moses received the gift of the Ten Commandments: rules for community living. After Moses gave these “words of the Lord and all the ordinances” to the people, the Lord asks Moses to come up the mountain where the Lord plans to give Moses the commandments written on stone. Ex. 24:3-14. Moses goes up the mountain.

Over the next 8 chapters of the Book of Exodus, God gives Moses detailed instructions for building and furnishing a Tabernacle: the sanctuary; the specific materials to be used, the

dimensions for the ark of the covenant; the table; the lamp stand; the incense; the curtains; the vestments of the high priests – which were to include the ephod, a breast piece, a robe, a checkered tunic, a turban and a sash using gold, blue, purple, crimson yarns and finest linens. According to the Scripture, giving these instructions takes forty days. In other words, a long time.

Meanwhile, the people wonder where Moses is, why he has not returned, and ‘after forty days’ (a long time) they decide he is gone – they despair, they give up on him. After forty years in the wilderness, during which God faithfully led, fed, clothed, sheltered and provided water, they give up when it appears their leader has left them alone. God’s priest, Aaron, gives up, too.

Well, it’s not too hard to understand – forty years of desert wandering, looking for a land in which to put down their roots, would be frustrating and many of us might give up a lot sooner.

Further, we expect our leadership to be *here*, watching over us and leading us...not ‘over *there*,’ some place else. We expect God to be *here*, not over *there*, some place else. We expect our president to be in his oval office when some crisis occurs, not out on the golf course. And we shudder to even think about God taking a sabbath day off. Moses and God are up on the mountain! Over there. Inaccessible. Under Aaron’s direction, the exhausted, frightened Israelites make a golden calf to worship in place of the (absent) God, and then they throw a party to celebrate the golden calf. A god they can see and touch. A god who stays where they put him and doesn’t go away.

God looks down from the mountain and says to Moses, *do you know what your people are doing down there?* “Your people are acting perversely.” Now, as a parent of six children, there was more than one occasion when, after a difficult day, I said to the children’s father, do you know what *your* son did today?

So I kind of ‘get it’ when God says ‘*your*’ people. I imagine that God would be fed up with being a loving and steadfast provider, and receiving complaints and whining instead of gratitude in response. I understand that God would be angry when the people turn their backs on God and make a golden calf to worship and glorify.

Moses doesn’t miss a beat. They’re **your** covenant people, Yahweh. **You** asked me to lead them, remember? When God threatens to annihilate ‘this stiff-necked people’, Moses says something like, ‘don’t embarrass yourself, God – the Egyptians will laugh at you, leading these Israelites out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert! Don’t do that.’ The Scripture says, “*And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*”

Great interplay of *your* and *his* – What a conversation with God! Challenge, parry, thrust.

What about the parabolic meaning? What are truths relevant to us today?

There is a big difference between, on the one hand, creating a worship space which moves us to experiences of God's glory and into relationship with God, a space which guides us and helps us pay attention to God and center ourselves in God – and, on the other hand, acting like whining Israelites wandering in the desert, centering ourselves in something finite that becomes a god to us. Something like the golden calf.

We can argue with God, that's ok. God listens. God does not turn his back on us, even when we turn our backs on God. Infinite grace.

When we try to relieve ourselves of communal responsibility and say, these are *your* people God, God reminds us this is *our* people, *our* global community. We are mutually – covenantally– accountable for and to our community.

The parable of the wedding banquet is about another party, with improbable twists and turns which strain our credulity – especially if we are inclined to read scripture literally. This banquet is the third of three parables Jesus tells in response to a confrontation in the Temple. The extreme images are like a political cartoon – and the pharisees and scribes understand that Jesus is talking about *them*, the civic and religious leaders. Thereafter, they begin to actively plot against Jesus, by trying to entrap him with trick questions.

Here's the story. The king is having a wedding celebration for his son, he sends out invitations to the elite. This first group to be invited rejects the invitation out of hand. Then the king makes known that he is preparing an elaborate feast – the invitations sound more enticing. He even sends his slaves out to remind his selected guests to attend, like an e-mail 'constant contact' reminder.

Not only do the guests fail to show up, but they kill the king's messengers. The king's reaction is not pretty – he burns down the city and everyone in it.

The king is determined that the great wedding banquet is still going to happen. He sends his slaves back out to invite anyone and everyone (although we might wonder who is left in the burned out city). This time, everybody shows up – both 'good and bad' according to the story – all hoping to avoid having another major disaster visited on the community.

The people come as they are, of course, because the invitation was immediate, 'come now'. But one guest refuses to wear a wedding robe, and the king is mightily insulted. The king doesn't just tell the party-crashing improperly attired guest to leave, he throws him out. Not just out of the banquet hall, but '*into the outer darkness*'. Matt. 22:13

Jesus tells us this parable is about the kingdom of God. I find it helpful to think about the context in which Matthew's Gospel was written towards the end of the first century A.D.. There was conflict between faithful Jews who accepted the good news of the Messiah, and those (faithful) Jews who did not. The king's burning of the city would evoke memories of the Roman

destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and cast the destruction of Jerusalem as a judgment of God against those who rejected the good news message. The king's third invitation – to all and any– suggests the unexpected inclusion of the gentiles, who were (historically) the unworthy outsiders.

Today we might hear this message.

The doors of the kingdom are wide open, all are invited, but once you come in, there are standards to be followed. Wear the wedding robe, no matter what you have on when you enter. That's not about your garment, but, as Paul instructs the Philippians, 'do whatever is true, honorable, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, commendable.' Or, we might say, that's about honoring your baptismal vows.

If you come to the party, you are expected to participate in the feast, and to *party*, to be joyous. As one commentator sums it up, 'put on your party dress and get with the program.'

What if you accept the invitation to the feast, but in your daily life deny what it represents? What then?

Karl Barth, theologian, says this:

It all boils down to the fact that the invitation is to a feast, and that he who does not obey and come accordingly, and therefore festively, declines and spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all. (*Church Dogmatics* as quoted in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*)

Why did we build this narthex? What will we make of it? How are we transformed?

These questions are not frivolous. They matter greatly. These questions – and our responses – shape what we think the Christian life is all about.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
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