

Proper 23 - Oct. 15, 2017
Matthew 22:1-14
'summoned to the banquet'

Yesterday, I read a review of the book *T'Shuva! God's Cry to America and the Nations*, by J.K. Pritchard. According to the reviewer, the author challenges us to think long and hard about our spiritual well being in this world full of benign distractions and malignant senseless violence. What caught my eye is that phrase, *benign distractions and malignant senseless violence*. We spend our lives navigating through benign distractions and senseless violence.

In that world, where and when is this feast God promises in today's scripture? Will the banquet take place amid the politics of violence, as Jesus' parable suggests? Will God prepare the feast in the presence of our enemies, 23rd psalm? Is the feast here and now, or will God prepare it only after the cities of the oppressors are destroyed, as in Isaiah speaking to Israel in exile? *T'Shuva* is a Hebrew word meaning repentance, change our thinking. I wonder, is God's invitation to the banquet a metaphor for God's cry for our repentance?

Look at how cavalierly the people treat God's invitation to the feast in Matthew's Gospel! Our human faithfulness is a fragile thing.

If *everyone* is invited to the feast, maybe we aren't so sure we want to come. Dare we refuse God's invitation? Are there consequences for our unfaithfulness? If we decline to come, will God invite us again?

We struggle with this paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty.

We assume, in our modern culture, that the banquet host and the invited guests have choices. When I plan a dinner party, I usually invite 12 to 14, knowing that the 10 who show up can sit comfortably at our table. Is God's banquet plan like that, anticipating some but not all will come?

Responding to an invitation is about the priorities of the intended guest. When my sister turned 60, her spouse hosted a large party at their home in New Jersey -- I did not attend, promising to visit on her next birthday. My sister passed away four months after her 60th birthday. Fifteen years later, I cannot remember what obligations I had that were so pressing I couldn't make time to be there on her birthday. No second chance, big time regret.

To appreciate Jesus' banquet parable, we need some understanding about the ancient culture of kings and subjects. Although couched as invitation, the king *summoned* his guests – refusing to come was not a viable option. It was a declaration of insurrection. The guests' rebellion was quelled by their deaths and the destruction of their homes. The ancient kings often provided the summoned guests with festal clothing – refusing to wear the clothing flouted the king's authority just as much as refusing the invitation. Treason.

Is this ancient view of kings really how the kingdom of God is, and will be? Is our modern day world view of choices how the kingdom is and will be?

In the parable, the escalating reckonings between the king and his subjects are terrifying. The A-list guests turn down the king's first invitations. When the king summons them a second time, the putative guests murder the messengers! The hot-headed king kills the murderers and burns their city! Others – *both good and bad*, the parable says – are 'invited' in their place so the wedding hall will be filled. [I can't help thinking of the large crowds which some politicians demand and exaggerate at their public appearances] Then, one last minute 'guest', dragged in off the streets, is ejected into eternal darkness for not wearing the right clothing.

Our spiritual well-being demands that we reconcile this egotistical, offensive, ungenerous, judgmental, violent king in the parable, with Jesus' teachings of a God of forgiveness, love and grace. With Jesus as king.

Other parables about the kingdom, begin, 'the kingdom of God is like...', or, 'will be like'. The parable of the banquet begins, 'the kingdom of God may be *compared to*.' *May be compared to*.... our flawed human vision.

This king who refuses to feed those who refuse loyalty to him, who destroys the cities when he is slighted by the citizens – this is the king and kingdom we make in our own image. Our brokenness, our violence, our 'theology' of scarcity.

The king of the incarnation is different. God interrupts our world to extend the gift of salvation even to those who have been God's enemies. Love is the foundational truth that defines God's Kingdom.

What are the consequences for those who refuse the King's invitation? Consider the Crusades, or for that matter, any holy war in which the faithful claimed the right to judge those who do not accept God's invitation. Is the Kingdom of God like that? The faithful get to judge?

Last week Bishop Rickel talked about packing your backpack for your fears. I wonder whether one of our great fears is that we will be judged harshly if we loyal subjects *fail to judge* those we see as not loyal? Is that warped compulsion to judge why someone packs a rifle, plots a hate crime or a mass shooting or an act of terrorism?

What *should* the consequences be when faithfulness has been betrayed, when trust has been broken? When God's invitation to the feast is refused? Who gets to judge?

We struggle with this paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty.

And, we struggle with the closely related paradox of the election of grace – being chosen– and the obligation of obedience to the conditions of the host. Is filling the hall more important than

the faithfulness of those who come?

Consider Luke's version of the Parable of the Banquet. Luke 14:16-24.

Then Jesus said to him, someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'

Those who are invited and do not come *when the feast is ready* will not share in it. Will there be another invitation? Another feast, another chance?

Let me suggest a contemporary banquet parable.

It was a football Sunday in Anacortes, the Seahawks were scheduled to play around 11 am. Many in the congregation, being ardent football fans, stayed home to watch the game. Next Sunday would be good enough, they thought. The Lord's Supper was prepared and an abundant coffee hour awaited the few who arrived. So the deacon and Sr. Warden drove their cars into town and invited others to come, to share the feast – Starbucks, Harbor House, Chandlers Square, people shopping at the Safeway and the Market, and all the homeless they could find. They went to Washington Park, and the ferry docks. The church musician played soft music while the guests assembled and soon the church was filled. Yet there was still room. As the service began, a disheveled fellow appeared in the doorway, carrying a large plastic bag almost as big and round as he was. He walked up the altar stairs and took the empty seat behind the altar.

The feast was consumed with joy; all left expressing gratitude for the unexpected fellowship; many took leftovers home. The next Sunday, the regular congregation returned to church (there being no football to watch). The ushers wouldn't let the homeless person with the large bag sit up front; people took their usual seats and didn't make room for others who didn't smell so good, or looked a bit different, and these 'others' had to sit in the back or crowded uncomfortably into the front row. The joyful welcoming and hospitality of the previous Sunday was missing. Not surprisingly, on the third Sunday, the congregation was back to its usual size. The feast was smaller, diminished somehow, and the congregation (even those who sometimes stayed home to watch football) felt the loss. Who will share the feast with us, they wondered?

God invites many different people. Those who feel hurt by the Church, dismayed by their Church experiences – the “dis-invited guests” – are our doing. That’s on us, not God. I wonder, though, is that question, *Who will share the feast?* an extension/reflection of our priorities?

Is it possible that we equate ‘chosen,’ that is, invited by God, with *entitlement* – we come to the feast when we feel like it? Has our understanding of grace become a *presumption* of grace, such that we are unprepared for God’s judgement? The invitation to the king’s feast confers both privilege and responsibility.

Our spiritual well-being in this world of benign distraction and malignant senseless violence requires us to grasp one final point: the banquet is gathering in community. The King invites us to *come together* to break bread. To come together in gratitude for God’s blessings, to come together to share the feast.

Thank you, Lord, for inviting us, for being with us in times of terror and fear.

Thank you for your many invitations throughout our lives, even when we stand back and don’t fully commit ourselves in return.

Thank you, Lord, for your *expectations of us* – we are your people and we will share your word, we will confess when we have erred, we will recognize that those who come into your presence unwashed, unkempt, crippled, lame, are as welcome in your house as we are.

Thank you for teaching us that there is always room for more in God’s house, and that you prepare the feast for all.

Lord, Grant us grace to extend our love even to those who refuse your invitation, and to be truly open to all those who come.

Amen

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