

## PROPER 23, PENTECOST 20, YEAR A, OCTOBER 15, 2023

There's a story about a woman who arrived late for a wedding. She was very frustrated and harried as her preparations took longer than she expected. As she raced up the stairs to the church an usher asked her for her invitation. She replied quite haughtily, "I don't have one!" The usher asked her, "Well are you a friend of the grooms?" "Certainly not," she snapped, "I'm the mother of the bride!"

A little humor before getting into today's Gospel reading which leaves you reeling and wondering What the H is this all about? It is shocking and outrageous, filled with violent imagery that is all set inside a wedding banquet no less! What, if any, is the redeemable value in this story? To hear this parable one could only conclude that God is an angry king who, if he doesn't get his way, destroys his own people and burns their cities. Seriously?? Is God really that cruel and vindictive as this story states?

I think it's important for us to step back and look at this in a different way. Perhaps Jesus told this parable in such an extreme and offensive way precisely because we do believe in a God as harsh as the king who turns his armies loose on his own people. Is it possible that Jesus is offering us a critical description of how God's kingdom is often depicted by God's own followers? What if the king in the parable isn't God at all rather what we project onto God? What if the king embodies everything we've learned to associate with power and authority from watching other, all-too-human kings and rulers? Not just leaders from the past but leaders in our own time and place who exercise their authority in abusive, violent ways.

Do we, consciously or not, present to the world a God who is easily offended, displeased and dishonored and whose very being is based on an unyielding and even violent anger? Do we believe in a God whose invitation to God's kingdom has strings attached to it?

It's easy enough to say no, we don't. Yet we are surrounded by people who have been victimized by brutal religion, many of them bludgeoned by the "Christian" depiction of a God who is angry, withholding, transactional, and craving perfectionism. Some of us have friends or family members who have experienced the church as petty, ungenerous, and judgmental. Most of us know Christians so narrow-minded and exclusionary in their faith practice that we dare not approach them. Some of us still carry deep wounds from the years or decades we spent appeasing the "king" we mistook for God.

In this parable Jesus is being deliberately provocative. He challenges our preconceived ideas about what God and God's kingdom are like and that it is nothing like we can imagine. In that often used phrase, Jesus is inviting us to think outside the box. All too often we make the assumption that God judges us in the same way we so often judge others. More often than not our judgments of others are judgments of exclusion. What if it's just the opposite with God? What if Jesus is trying to shock us into seeing that the kingdom of heaven is not business as usual according to our standards? What if God's judgment on our lives is one of grace, acceptance, and invitation, a judgment of inclusion?

That sounds pretty good until we get to the part of the story when the king tosses out one of the wedding guests for not being properly attired. Really!! Are you kidding me? What happened to inclusion?

I am sure the people hearing this story for the first time were shocked and surprised too as, in many cultures, hospitality was very important. It would have been unforgivable for guests or hosts to behave in this manner. What is Jesus getting at here? Once again, he is challenging the assumptions of his listeners, shocking them with a surprising or unexpected twist to the story.

Why is the guests' lack of proper wedding attire an issue? An answer is found in the New Testament. Paul often refers to putting on new or elegant clothes as a metaphor for spiritual change, growth and maturity. In other words we need to rid ourselves first of robes of privilege, power, and complicity and clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience but most of all love. We have to do more than just show up. We have to be willing to give up our old ways and clothe ourselves in the way of God. What that means is to wrap our lives in kindness, compassion, humility, patience and love. Woody Allen once famously said, 80% of life is just showing up. Jesus says we need to do more than just show up. Being a Christian means to embrace a willingness to grow, change and become the people God intended us to be.

G. K. Chesterton once said just going to church doesn't make you a Christian no more than standing in your garage makes you a car. That's the paradox of our faith. Everyone is invited to be a part of the kingdom. Everyone is included and no one is excluded. But this is not about just claiming to be a Christian without acting like one. It's not enough to just be here we also have to be willing to take part in God's work. It's about realizing there is more to life than things we think can bring us real fulfillment. It's not enough to admire Jesus we must desire to be like Jesus. That means the willingness to be changed, to forgive, have compassion and put loving our neighbor into action.

Jesus wanted to expand people's perceptions. He was not saying that the kingdom of heaven is like the king or the banquet or the guests. He is saying that the kingdom of heaven is beyond our expectations, beyond our assumptions, beyond what we can analyze and think through and get our heads around. This is not to say that we should not think or try to understand. It is only to say that there is always more than what we can see and that God will always surprise us, will always confront us with the unexpected. The point is for us to always try to be open to more, not just to rest in the comfortable things of our lives or the assumption that we know all about God.

There is a Hasidic story that tells of a little boy playing hide and seek with his friends. For some unknown reason, they stopped playing while he was hiding. He began to cry and his grandfather came out of the house to see what was troubling him and to comfort him. After learning what had happened, the grandfather said, "Don't cry because the boys did not come to find you. Perhaps you can learn a lesson from this disappointment. All of life is like a game between God and us. Only it is God who is weeping for we are not playing the game fairly." We are not playing fair when we continue to believe in the lie of an angry, vindictive and judgmental God. If you truly believe in a compassionate and loving God then walk the talk and show through your actions the grace filled compassionate, inclusive, loving God.

The parables of Jesus are meant to afflict the comfortable. The parables are meant to show us who God is, and who God isn't. This story is about God's constant, persistence, and repeated invitation to God's great party. All we have to do is to receive

the gift freely offered and then live into the life to which God has called us. So, I am left with only one question – Are you ready to join this incredible party? Amen.