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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Proper 23, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 32:1-14](#)

[Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23](#)

[Philippians 4:1-9](#)

[Matthew 22:1-14](#)

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When I was in seminary a guest lecturer handed out a tongue-in-cheek card entitled “Ten Modest Suggestions to Keep Your Vocation in Good Health,” with a small notation: “suitable for framing.” I found it so helpful that I did frame it, and I still keep it in my office. The suggestions include things like “Say the Daily Office” and “Keep your financial life in order” and “Keep your sex life in order; keep your promises” and “Remember it’s not about you and you’re not entitled to anything.” And they include my favorite: “Don’t dismiss the tradition. You are not smarter than it. Wrestle with it until it blesses you.”

It’s a reference, of course, to the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis, who wrestles all night with a mysterious stranger only to find out that it’s God. And it’s a good word for us as Christians, who live within a great historical tradition, and who need to continually find ways to move into the future without coming unmoored.

Sometimes it's scripture that we need to wrestle with. As Anglicans we believe scripture is inspired; the Holy Spirit breathes through it and speaks God's Word to us. But that doesn't mean we believe it's inerrant, or self-interpreting, or free of the biases and limitations of its human authors. So it takes wrestling sometimes to discover where God's Word is for us in a particular text.

I think today's parable from Matthew's gospel is one of those. It's not often we get a glimpse of the different ways early Christians retold the same parable of Jesus. But with this one, we do—because it happens that Luke's gospel has a simpler version of this same story. Luke's version has a man who decides to throw a banquet. The people he invites turn down his invitation with various excuses. So, because he's so determined to throw a fabulous party, he sends his servants out instead to go out onto the streets and bring in everyone they can find. End of parable. It's an appealing image of God's inclusive grace. I like this parable. Maybe you do too.

I don't find it as easy to like Matthew's version. Because Matthew has taken this slim little story and hopped it up on steroids—into a parable of rage and retribution. Now the man is a king who's throwing a wedding banquet for his son. But when he calls his guests, instead of just declining his invitation, they kill his messengers. That unusual response might be our first clue that we're on strange territory. In turn, the king massively escalates the violence. He wipes them out and burns their city to the ground—all, apparently, while still getting ready for the banquet, because he then sends out another round of messengers. This time no one is bold enough to say no. But then, like a dictator strutting and toying with his squirming guests, he singles out a poor underdressed fellow and has him sent to the gulag.

What kind of parable is this? Is the king supposed to be God? Are we the guests? And what is God going to do to us if we don't wear the right robe? For that matter, what is the robe? Is it baptism, good deeds, faith in Jesus? The conventional readings of this parable collide and compete with one another. And it can be hard to hear the gospel, the good news, through all the violence.

Now the scriptures were written by people: faithful people who sought to make sense of their experience of God in the places and times where they lived. And the anonymous Christian who compiled the gospel we know as "Matthew" lived in a violent time. Most scholars think Matthew was a Jewish believer in Jesus. He and his community understood themselves as faithful Jews, but they also welcomed Gentiles who had come to believe. Meanwhile, they struggled to understand why most of their Jewish siblings weren't accepting their invitation to join this movement. And in the midst of all that, there was a revolt against the Roman Empire, and the Roman army responded by flattening Jerusalem and burning the Temple to the ground. It's that trauma, and this particular group of Jewish Christians' attempt to make sense of it, that has affected the way this parable was told and retold in Matthew's community.

Most scholars believe Matthew has taken the simple parable originally told by Jesus and made it into an allegory: God invites the people of Israel to the Messiah's banquet, but their leaders reject the message of the prophets and finally of Jesus himself, and kill him. In Matthew's understanding, then, the destruction of the Temple is God's judgment on that rejection of Jesus.

We can have compassion for Matthew's point of view without sharing his interpretation. For one thing, Matthew is himself Jewish. And it is when we are members of a group, and then feel betrayed by our siblings within that group, that we can come to criticize it most violently. In the trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew comes to believe that the church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people. Not all the books of the New Testament have that point of view. If you read Paul's letters, for example, it's clear he believes that the Jewish people remain God's special, chosen people until the end of time. But Matthew's response to that trauma of Roman violence has had violent consequences in turn. For many centuries Christians have relied on Matthew's interpretation to support bigotry against God's first people, the Jews.

Now a parable isn't a code meant to be deciphered: it's a story through which the Spirit speaks to us. And so there is always more than one way to read it. There may well be lessons to be drawn from this story if we read it in the conventional way, with God as the king and us as the guests. For example, God's invitation isn't free. It costs something, and we can refuse it. And the consequences of refusing God's invitation are serious. But we can't enshrine this as the only reading. Because it's also true that this king behaves in ways that simply don't match the God we know from the rest of scripture. Think of the God we meet in Exodus today, whose anger burns hot when the people turn to a false god, but who is also quick to forgive them rather than destroy them. Think of what Matthew himself writes elsewhere about Jesus teaching his disciples to forgive seventy times seven. And think of Jesus himself who refuses to live by the sword and forgives his enemies right up to the cross itself.

In fact, if there's any character in this parable who most resembles Jesus, it might just be the man at the end, the one without the garment. Like Jesus, he's silent in the face of his accuser. He's bound hand and feet and cast out into the darkness. If we read this parable with Jesus as the innocent victim, we might discover something totally new here about God—the God who shows up in solidarity with everyone who is terrorized or tortured or excluded. It turns out, maybe, that Matthew is writing scripture in spite of himself. Because a parable is never about just one thing. And sometimes when we wrestle with it Jesus gets in there somehow, the good news gets in somehow, where we least expect.

This week again we have seen horrific violence in the Holy Land. The brutal murder by terrorists of Israeli civilians, music festival attendees, elders, children; followed by a military retaliation that is killing Palestinians in turn, including civilians, elders, children. We are again seeing the legacy of generation after generation of trauma breaking forth in hatred and fear and destruction. And Jesus' voice speaks to us today out of the trauma, out of the violence even of the parable it's embedded in: Who are the ones who are being cast into the outer darkness? Who are the ones whose homes and lives are being destroyed? Whose suffering would it be easy for us to ignore? Each of these people is Jesus for us.

Jesus is the king's son in this parable, and he is also the speechless man. And he is the robe, the wedding garment God has already provided for the whole world. He is even the food for the banquet itself, a banquet we celebrate again today on behalf of all who suffer everywhere and for the life of the world God loves. And in him there are no scapegoats, no outcasts.