

Sermon: Pentecost 19

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 15, 2017

Year A
Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

I dislike today's parable... not because of what it ultimately reveals to us... I really... really like what it ultimately reveals to us... but getting there... getting to that point... arriving at that understanding... is like getting the knots out of a silver chain... or out of a string of Christmas lights... or a knot out of the calf in your leg... but believe me... in this case... with today's Gospel... the effort is well worth it... [and] today... I draw on the work of Fr. Robert Capon...

This parable is told during Holy Week... during the last week of Jesus' life... it's a continuation of sorts... of Jesus responding to the chief priests and Pharisees... who are trying to arrest and kill him... and against whom Jesus spoke in last week's Gospel... about falling on the rejected cornerstone... and being broken to pieces... and so it's no surprise that this parable is far *hotter*... than last week's... and filled with more severity... even death...

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a King who gave a wedding banquet for his son... he sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet... but they would not come...

Capon writes... for openers... Jesus is speaking about the authorities' rejection of his invitation to believe in him... but only for openers... because the reach of this parable goes far beyond the Jews of Jesus' own time... and even beyond the Jewish / Gentile conflict in the early church... it defines the nature... of both the salvation he offers to the whole world... and of the judgment he pronounces on the rejection of that offer...

The King is throwing a party... the King likes to throw parties... invitations had already gone out... but for some reason... the King needed to send slaves to fetch those who had already been invited... but they would not come... Capon writes... score a sad point for the unhappy truth... that the world is full of fools who won't believe a good thing when they hear it...

Free grace... dying love... and unqualified acceptance might as well be a fifteen foot crocodile... the way we respond to it... it seems we will sooner accept a God we will be fed to... than one we will be fed by...

But the King knows what a good deal he's offering... so he sends more messengers to the invitees... and says... *Look... I have prepared my dinner... my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered... and everything is ready... come to the wedding banquet*... they could have claimed that the mailman stepped on a landmine in the front lawn and they never got the invitation... they could have just thought evil thoughts about the messengers... imagining what they'd like to do to them... but Jesus wants to highlight the incongruous enormity of the rejection... so he insists on nothing less than heaps of murdered mailmen... and this made the King angry...

And what happens next comes right out of an episode of the A-Team... napalm enveloping ladies in summer frocks... Rolls Royces being blown up by missiles... hundred-room mansions being burned to the ground... this is not just some old Newport - Southampton snub... this is crossing people off your list for good...

So let's look at the motivation for this violence... these were the people who had a right to be at a royal wedding... they were the Hollywood nobility... the stars of stage and screen... the movers and shakers... they were in short... the beautiful and the good... who would have docked their sixty-five foot yachts nearby... or driven up in their Mercedes... worn Dior gowns... which would have made a royal wedding look even better... but for all that... Capon writes... they were totally lacking in the trust and faith

that is the only divinely acceptable quality... and so they become... winners who lose... they are the Pharisee in the temple reading off his list of good deeds... they are Zacchaeus with his speech about what an honest crook he is... and they are you... and they are me... they are all of us who live in the twin certainties... that our good works will earn us the right to attend the Supper of the Lamb... and that if we have other plans... God's good nature will absolve us from having to sit through it...

So again... the ferocity comes because neither they... nor we... could possibly be more wrong about either of these two certainties... and Jesus insists on displaying them as being dead wrong... salvation is not by good works... and the heavenly banquet is not an option... we are saved only by our acceptance of a party already in progress... and God has paid for that party at the price of his own death... and since God counts only two things... only faith and grace... nothing else counts... because outside of the party... there is no life at all...

Which is why Jesus says... now has the King proceed to what for him is Plan B... but what for God has been Plan A all along... *Go therefore into the streets... and invite everyone you find... so they went and gathered all... both good and bad... both good and bad... you see... this detail isn't just a peculiarity of this parable... it's practically its Hallmark... Capon writes... of Jesus' major parables about the Kingdom and of Grace...*

In the Sower there is both good and bad results... in the Wheat and Weeds both are allowed to grow together until the Harvest... in the Net the Kingdom gathers every kind... and in the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son... Jesus goes out of his way to make heroes of life's losers... because in the Kingdom... evil is not a problem... it has already been ached out by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection... the only problem... is a faithless non-acceptance of God's having solved the problem of evil all by himself... and without ever once having mentioned the subject of reform...

God does not invite the good and snub the bad... God invites all of us... while we are yet sinners... and simply asks us to trust that invitation... and because all of the non-A-list people did trust that invitation... the wedding hall was filled with guests...

Some scholars suggest that it was customary for the host to supply the proper indoor attire for such an event... handing out Bill Blass and Vera Wang originals... so the King comes and surveys that great hall from the high balcony... and his eye is caught by someone who stands out in his ordinariness... his plain-ness... *friend... how did you get in here without a wedding robe?* ... and the man was speechless... let's come back to that...

Remember... the first-invited guests... Capon writes... were recipients of the King's favor... implicit in the invitation itself... was the King saying... *You're O.K. in my book... I want you at my party*... let me repeat... the invitation itself is the principal judgement... the principal judgement in this parable is that you've already been deemed worthy of the Heavenly Banquet... but when it's refused in distrust... when the first guests contradict the King's... *you're OK*... with their own *I'm not worthy*... or their own... *I've got to get back to my business or farm to earn worthiness*... the implicit judgement descends on them...

And the second wave of invitees are also recipients of the King's favor... he doesn't mind how they're dressed or how they smell... he doesn't mind whether they eat with their hands or how they blow their noses... he makes no stipulations about them... they are not asked to get their acts together in order to be worthy of the party... any more than the Prodigal Son had to guarantee amendment of life before getting the fatted calf... the Son's father... and the King... are party people... and anyone who refuses the invitation has already gone to Hell... but nobody is kicked out who wasn't already in... Hell may be an option... but if it is... it's one we receive only after we've already received the entirely non-optional gift of sitting together in the Heavenly places in Christ... and even for those who have refused the invitation... God never withdraws it...

because as Paul says in Romans 11:29... *the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance*... so from God's point of view... Hell is eternally unnecessary... because God in Jesus has made his Grace... and not our track record... the sole basis of salvation... and there is nothing in the world... neither height nor depth... nor anything else in all creation... and especially not our long-since-cancelled sins... that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus... the only ones who will not enjoy the Supper of the Lamb... are those who... while in the very thick of it... refuse to believe that they're already there...

The King asked the man and the man was speechless... there were many things the man could have said... but because the man said nothing... because he would not bring himself to relate to the King in any way... he would never have heard the King's reassurances of welcome... and so Jesus brings down on him the sentence of condemnation that he has already brought upon himself... even the Prodigal Son's older brother was not speechless... he was quite willing to complain to his father about how unfair it was... that his brother got sandals on his feet... and a ring on his finger... and the best robe in the house... but the older brother... even though he wanted to keep score... was still willing to be in relationship...

Generally... when we're not in community... when we're not in relationship... when we rely on ourselves... when we believe it's all up to us... and rely on works righteousness... there is weeping and gnashing of teeth... and that's why many are called... but few are chosen...

Mike+