

Sunday, October 15, 2017

19th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 23 (Year A)

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

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I have a confession to make. I seriously considered not even talking about this morning's Gospel at all, and only preaching on the other texts – because this morning's Gospel has always bothered me, and not in a good way. Often the Gospel is supposed to bother us, to make us think, to jerk us out of our comfort zone and into the place that God wants us to be. But this passage has never made any sense to me. We say we believe in a loving and forgiving God, and we believe in the message of Jesus, who came to give good news to all people. So what's going on with this Gospel message of throwing out the poor person who isn't dressed properly? Especially since this person didn't just wander in off the street – he was invited to come in to the feast. I was very tempted to just leave this one alone.

But then I thought, no, I have to deal with this. And I have to deal with it for a couple of reasons. First of all, our lessons are meant to challenge us, and running away from a challenge isn't the way I like to live my life. And secondly, I firmly believe that clergy need to be honest with their fellow ministers. We need to model truthful behavior. We need to show that we struggle with stuff just like everybody.

So we will indeed tackle that Gospel passage, and here's how we'll do it. We'll work our way through this morning's readings in sequence; that will help explain why I have difficulties with this Gospel. Then I will tell you about the only commentary on this passage that I think makes any sense at all, and I will leave it to you to determine whether you think this is a satisfactory explanation or not. And I promise by the end that there will be an application for us here today, especially in light of what's been going on recently.

So we begin with our collect, where we ask that God's grace may always precede and follow us, so that we may be able to do what God asks of us. We are reminded that we are fallible and have limited resources, and that we can't do everything God wants us to do all by ourselves. I have absolutely no problems with this – I firmly believe that we do need God's help and God's grace to surround us, so that we can do the best we're capable of doing, both individually and as a community. We are also reminded by this collect of the manifestations of God in the Exodus – the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, preceding and following God's people, protecting them and shepherding them to their new lives in the promised land.

Our Exodus lesson then shows us just how much we need God's grace, and how willing God is to be gracious to us. Here are the Hebrew people, in the midst of their journey, forgetting all about how much God has done for them. Moses is delayed coming down from his encounter with God, and the people decide that they need to bring their God closer to them. They need a God who is familiar and tangible, rather than an unpredictable, whirlwind God. So they make the golden calf and begin to worship it. And this, understandably, makes God more than a little annoyed with them! God is about to destroy all of them, but Moses intervenes with a plea to spare the people. They aren't evil, Moses says, just misguided. They need your mercy. And God

relents, and decides merely to punish the people, rather than destroying them entirely. So we have a God who is capable of both anger and mercy; a God who weighs motivations and understands limitations, and who bends over backwards to nurture God's people, particularly when asked to do so.

Our Psalm also brings home these lessons to us. We celebrate the God who is the God of mercy. We remember that we are sinners even as our forebears were sinners. And we ask God to continue to be the God that rescues and saves us, rather than the God who visits his people with "consuming wrath."

We move on to Paul and his letter to the Philippians. And Paul tells us that the Lord is near, and so we are not to worry about anything. Instead, we are to let God know what we need, with prayer and thanksgiving – not so that God knows what we need, because of course God already knows! Rather, we are to say what we need so that we truly understand what we need, so that we admit to ourselves that we can't do this alone, and that we need to rely both on our community and on God. And having made our requests, we are to move forward in peace, because we will be guarded and guided by God.

So far, so good. We have a clear picture of who God is, and we have a clear picture of who we are. Everything seems to be hanging together.

And then we come to the parable of the wedding banquet, which just seems to throw everything we've heard, and much of what we believe about God, into total disarray. In the parable, the king lays out a wedding banquet, but the original guests don't come. So the king tells his servants to go out and invite in everyone, no matter how good or bad they are. And when the hall is full, the king notices that one person there isn't wearing the proper clothes, and that person has no explanation for why he is not dressed properly. So the king throws out the person as being unworthy of being at the feast. What's going on here? What happened to mercy and forgiveness?

Before I get to a possible answer to those questions, I need to explain a little bit about Jewish wedding customs, because that knowledge is important to understanding the lesson. In Jesus' time, wedding banquets were not advertised far in advance. It took a lot of time to gather all the supplies needed for the feast, and to cook and prepare the meal. So it wasn't like today, where you get six months' or a year's advance notice of when you're supposed to show up. The feast was ready when it was ready, and you literally had someone come to you and say, "Time to go – the feast is on!" And you were supposed to drop everything and go, no matter what you were doing. So the people who ignore the summons, and who mistreat the messengers, are really not holding up their end of the social contract.

The wedding garments are also part of that social contract. We need to remember that most people in Biblical times had very few changes of clothes, because clothes were costly and hard to make. So a king or ruler who gave such a feast would also prepare garments for all his guests, and they would be given out as people came in the door. It was a way of covering up any poverty or lack of dress in the guests, ensuring that pretty much everyone looked alike and could have a good time. And it also had the effect of binding people together into one group. A wedding feast was one of the few times when rich and poor mixed together with at least some

appearance of equality – everyone ate the same foods, drank the same wines, and mingled together without having to worry about who ranked over whom.

Knowing this, we now have a possible explanation for why the king might be upset at the person who isn't dressed properly. It isn't that the person tried to sneak in uninvited; it isn't that the person was too poor to have the right clothes. It's that he refused to put on what was given to him and join in the community. For whatever reason – and the Gospel passage itself says that the person has no explanation – he didn't join the group fully. He held himself apart, not taking on the responsibility of community participation that came along with the feast. In effect, he was just there for the food, for what he could get out of the occasion.

That explanation is the only one in all the commentaries I've read on this passage that makes any sense to me. And at first it made me uneasy, even though it made sense. Because God casting someone out for not doing the right thing sounds distressingly like the idea that we earn our way to heaven through our works. And that's not an Anglican or Episcopal point of view. We believe in the salvation freely offered by Jesus, ours for the taking if we only reach out and take it. And that "if" is our clue right there to make this passage make even more sense. We need to take on what God offers us, because we are in relationship with God.

This is what ties all our readings together. All our lessons are about covenants, about relationships that depend on both sides doing what they promise to do. Our Gospel is really a metaphor for our baptismal covenant. When we are baptized, and every time thereafter when we repeat the baptismal covenant, we agree to take on the responsibilities that go along with being a Christian. We agree to behave in a certain manner so as to help bring about the kingdom here on earth. So if we look at the Gospel in that light, then we do see a reason for God rejecting the undressed guest. He didn't take on the responsibilities inherent in being at the feast. He wasn't helping to build up the community, but was holding himself apart from it after accepting the invitation. And that kind of thing will destroy a community quicker than almost anything else. The people on the sidelines who only observe, who don't do their share to build the community, tear down the community instead. Those are the people that God turns away at the end.

All of our lessons are a reminder that God the shepherd carries a staff to protect and defend the flock, and sometimes the staff gets used. Not, perhaps, a comforting message, but one we need to hear occasionally. And I think the good news for us, sitting here this morning, is that St. Gregory's is a place that has a good handle on being the kind of community where the correcting staff is less necessary. We are doing God's work here, spreading a table in the wilderness and inviting people in to see what we have to offer. Look at the Food Bank. Look at all the work we do with St. Luke's and their shower program. Look at Music at Four and the wonderful time of music and fellowship it offers. St. Gregory's offers a lot to the community. And we're always looking for ways to do more and do better. This last Wednesday six of us went to an interfaith meeting on homelessness, where we got lots of good information and ideas on how to address the issues of homelessness in Long Beach – how to help prevent it, how to respond to the needs of the community around us, and how to bring people on the margins into community so that they don't fall through the cracks.

This really is how we build the kingdom, my friends. We don't build this community, or God's kingdom on earth, by worrying about numbers or the budget or the state of the buildings. We grow by doing what we do best – showing hospitality and fun and work mingled together, with everyone helping as they are able and everyone coming to enjoy the fruits of our labors. We grow by taking on the responsibility that comes with being God's people, the responsibility of inviting others to come share the feast and help build the kind of world that God has in mind.

If we concentrate on the things we love and do best; if we bring our concerns to God, but then go about our business with peace in our hearts; we will grow in love and service, and people will see what we're doing. And people will come to join us – never doubt it. We can do this, with God's help. Trust God that we are growing in grace and sowing the seeds for the future, even if we don't always see clearly what's happening. Trust that God knows what God is doing, and that we really are children of a merciful and understanding God. Rejoice in God, and rejoice in our work. Take a moment to give yourself a pat on the back for what's been done so far. Then set your hearts and minds on the future and continue to do what you can, trusting God to make up anything we lack. That way none of us need worry about being undressed when we're called to the banquet.

Amen.