

The Rev. Betsy Ivey
Pent 18_Prop 23
October 12, 2014

Mother Barbara and I were talking to a parishioner after last week's service about the gravity of the parables on which we have been preaching these last few weeks. There is good news within, for sure, but the journey to it requires us to look deeply into our faith and commitment to ourselves and each other. We, also, noted that as we have been studying the Rule of Benedict, we have become more assured of our commitment to the creating community in all gatherings, and especially in St. Andrew's, and noted how pertinent the parables are to creating community. So bear with us as we glean the good news from them.

The Gospel reading today from Matthew may seem a little murky. It's an allegory: a story that is talking about one thing, but you know Matthew is talking about something else as well; and, you're supposed to be able not only understand what is being said, but understand the meaning of the sub-story. Matthew, or Jesus to whom this parable is attributed, gives us a hint at the beginning by telling us the 'kingdom of heaven' is the subject of the parable. So that's a start.

And, if this parable is familiar to you, you may remember it from Luke. The king wasn't as ruthless in Luke as in Matthew's version this parable. Luke didn't kill off the servants sent out to invite them, and the king didn't kill off those who killed the slaves. He just didn't invite the people who found other reasons not to come. But in this story, the guests are more stiff-necked: they refuse to come, insulted the king by making light of his invitation and some really violent guests killed the servants. The Luke parable, and a similar one found in the Gospel of Thomas, by the way, are the Merchant-Ivory versions of the parable while this the Matthew version is more Jerry Bruckmiller, lots of action and violence. But, then, Matthew is very upset because in his world, after the destruction of the Temple and the leveling of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, his community of believers is frustrated that more of their fellow Jews aren't followers of Jesus. They are refusing to come to the banquet, to work for the kingdom of heaven; making light of Matthew's community who believe Jesus is the messiah; and, they stood back at watched as Jesus was killed. So Matthew is a bit upset, and gives us the Bruce Willis version of this parable.

And, so you might ask, 'what does this harsh parable to do with us good Church-goers'? We said 'yes' when invited to the banquet. We're here. We showed up. And, indeed you have, and we will get to us

But, I think that this parable is more a warning to the Church today. As the Church experiences declining numbers in an increasingly more secular, 'spiritual-but-not-religious world', is this parable telling the Church to wake up, or face its destruction through many's refusals to adhere to religion any longer, their disinterest in religion or its perceived relevancy in today's world? We no longer have the luxury of knowing that the Church is going to be here after we leave it to experience other ways of living as I did, and many people of my generation did. We were lucky to find it as much in tact as we did when we came back from our wanderings in our wildernesses, building golden calves and calling them God. I'm not as optimistic as theologian Phyllis Tickle who proposes in her model of the 'emergent Church' that this current crisis in the Church is just a hissy-fit of faith, and is the beginning of a new 500 year trend. I bet my life as a priest on her optimism, but I must admit I am not so sure we can survive. It is for sure that the Church twenty-five years from now is not going to be the Church of our forebears, and perhaps that is a good thing. The church must look at itself as the primary source of its demise. Secularism and worldliness are 'the others' who killed the slaves. They challenge the existence of the Church by refusing to attend the banquet. Perhaps they have a point. There are many times in the history of the Church when the Church was dressed in the wrong clothes to attend the banquet offered by God, as the second part of the parable addresses. The Church supported slavery in

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this country, and colonialism in other parts of the world. Anyone who knows anything about Jesus of Nazareth knows that he did not support the oppression of any human being, but vehemently, spoke against it. So there is a crisis of faith for which the Church must answer as we go forth even having turned back towards justice and righteousness. I am ever reminded of Mother Barbara's sermon on the 'road to Emmaus', one of my favorites that she has given, in which she reminded us that we, too, can turn around and head back to Zion. I truly believe that the Church has done this, that the scales of worldliness have fallen from eyes. Although we are bound in the darkness, weeping and gnashing our teeth, we are finding the light of God and walking towards it.

But, what of us who remain holding down the fort, so to speak; those of us sitting in the pews and standing in the pulpits?. Could this parable be speaking to us, too? It certainly speaks to me as a spiritual leader in the church, cajoling and, maybe, even warning me not to take a vibrant, God-and-people-loving congregation for granted, but to make sure this is a place they want to be a part of; that I engender your understanding that we are working for the kingdom of heaven in this place, and that the banquet table remains relevant to our lives and to the lives of the people we serve. This is 'hard work' for us as Mother Barbara says: not wanting to push the congregation too hard, yet knowing we need to exhort for commitment from the pews to ensure the existence of the Church which will usher in the kingdom of heaven.

And, so we must ask ourselves:

Do we take the Church for granted?

Do we come prepared as God wants us to be prepared or, do we decide what our faith is going to look like? God requires us to wear the fine robes of righteousness and justice to God's banquet. God requires us to be compassionate to each other both within and outside the walls of this community. Is this how we come dressed for Church? If we do, do we change our clothes when we go out into the world, putting on something the world will more readily recognize?

Are we committed to our faith, not just in spirituality but, also, in stewardship? Do we determine how we will give our treasure, talent and time, or are we listening to God?

Do we take for granted the sumptuousness of the meal God has prepared for us, or have we lost faith in its nourishment?

The banquet is love and peace of which the Church is the primary proponent. Love and peace are the rich foods of God's table which God has prepared for us. How much do we want to partake of them? The Communion table represents this feast from which we are fed the food of peace, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Every Sunday we remind ourselves of Jesus' commitment of his life to us. How will we commit our lives to the Church that exists because of him?

Amen.