Homily for Sunday, October 15, 2023
Matthew 22:1-14
Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB
Benedictine Sisters of Erie

This parable is not one of Scripture’s more comforting passages. Dreamlike in its twists and turns, it leaves us with many questions. And yet it is also full of glimpses of God’s love, glimpses that are easy to miss and easier to misunderstand.

As we consider this story today, I’d like us to set aside the traditional interpretation—which goes something like this: Jesus is warning the Jewish leaders that they rejected the invitation of God. God is seeking only the worthy, those clothed in faith, and anyone who does not meet these criteria is doomed to eternal punishment.

But this interpretation is completely out of step with its context. The Gospel of Matthew was written to a primarily Jewish audience, and it was not written to terrify them or scold them for missing the long-awaited Messiah. This Gospel gave them, and it gives us plenty of reason to believe that God has relentless power and drive to save us, to love us, to be with us. Remember a few weeks ago, when the Gospel passage from Matthew promised that everyone who did any work in the landowner’s vineyard would receive a full day’s wages, no matter how late they came? Remember Matthew’s parable of the Lost Sheep? Jesus promised that God would leave 99 sheep to find one lost sheep. Matthew’s message is clear: Jesus is here to deepen and expand the promise of salvation, not to threaten to end it, not to expel anyone from it.

And so, with that in mind, let’s look at this parable of the wedding banquet with fresh eyes.

Who is the wedding for, we might ask. And the Scriptures would tell us that, marvelous and unimaginable as it may be—it’s for us.

This is a recurring metaphor throughout the Bible. We sing it in our Isaiah 62 canticle: “As the newly married rejoice in each other/so shall God rejoice in you.” The entire book of Hosea compares God’s relationship to Israel to a troubled, but enduring marriage. We pray this, too: “I will espouse you to myself forever, I will espouse you in integrity and justice; you will be my people and I will be your God.”

Most memorable of all, the Song of Songs describes the passion and yearning and love between God and humanity. In Jesus’ time, that book was considered the pinnacle of Wisdom literature, carefully studied by the very religious scholars and priests to whom Jesus was speaking in this story. They would have understood instantly that when God gives a wedding, it is a wedding to us.

God’s deepest wish for humanity—as individuals and as a whole—is for us to live in unity with the Divine. So, we are called in this parable, as we are in so many other moments throughout the Scriptures and our lives, to give ourselves fully over to God.
“Forget your business! Sell your farm! Come to the feast!” Jesus is saying. And really he is saying—to the Pharisees and to us—“Give up the power and security that keeps you from living God’s love! Come and be one with God!”

Yes, come to the wedding feast! It’s your own wedding! Unite your heart with God in a moment of joy and delight—and in every other moment, too.

And yet, we read that there is hesitance. And we feel that there is so much hesitance in us. Perhaps that’s because we know that once we fully unite our hearts with God, we will completely embrace all the world’s suffering along with all its pleasure. And then we can no longer withhold our love from anyone. The beggar on the corner, the addict whose broken promises have exhausted our patience, the child down the street, or across the world, kidnapped or buried in rubble: when we love with a heart that is united with God, we cannot withhold our love from them. And we cannot fail to act for them, crying out for justice and peace.

Even if we’re seen as dreamers and idealists and fools, the heart that is united with God cannot stop loving. Even when it breaks, the heart that is united with God cannot stop loving.

And most of the time, for most of us, that is just a bit too daunting. And we hold back.

This is, I think, how it is for the guest who comes to the feast without wedding garments.

The ruler does not go to them in a rage. The ruler addresses them as “Friend,” asking them a pretty open-ended question. In other words, the ruler wants to know their story. Rather than reading it as an accusation—“How did you come to be here without a wedding garment?” What if we read the question in a curious tone: “How did you come to be here without a wedding garment?”

The ruler is inviting them—as God is inviting us—to a deeper level of intimacy, a greater sharing, a more profound honesty. God is inviting them to reckon with the ways that God has been active in their life, inviting them to a feast when, until recently, they were just on the road.

But the guest is silent.

The guest does not explain, or complain, or justify, or apologize. They do not open themselves to be known, to be changed. They do not open their heart.

The guest’s sin, then, is NOT a lack of preparation—it is a failure to engage with the Divine, a missed moment of grace. How can we grow in love if we are unwilling to consider our lives—how we came to be here—in the presence of God? How can we love as God loves if we will not reflect on what God has done for us?

Still. What are we to make of those chilling last lines: “Bind them hand and foot and throw them into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Does silence, does hesitance merit torment?
To this, all I can say is, God is still there, in that darkness outside. There is nowhere that God is not present. In fact, the darkness can be a place of revelation.

Remember, in Chapter 4 of this Gospel, just after Jesus emerges from his time in the desert and before he begins calling his disciples, Matthew writes, “Jesus lived … to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’ … From that time on Jesus began to preach.”

In the darkness, in the land of the shadow of death, in the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, our eyes become more sensitive to the light. More able to receive the Good News. More able to be open to, and more able to love with, the heart of God. If we spend time in that place of darkness, if we listen to the weeping, if we join in it ourselves, we might find ourselves changed. More able to dance and revel with the dancers and the revelers, more able to mourn and prophesy with the mourners and the prophets.

The invitation to the feast is never retracted. The wedding is never canceled. It’s only the timing that is up to us.

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Jacqueline Sanchez-Small OSB
6101 East Lake Road
Erie, PA 16511
www.eriebenedictines.org