

## Proper 23 Year A

‘The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.....And in this kingdom many are called but few are chosen.’”

I haven't yet succumbed to the temptation to join Facebook, though the temptation is growing....Katharine still let's me know her password so I can stalk around on Facebook and keep up with a lot of you, and a lot of other folks as well..... “on the bayway grooving out to ACDC” LOL someone responds...and just underneath three others “Like” signified by an upturned depiction of a thumb there on the page.... “Got my starbucks vente....good to go!” My niece chronicles. OMG, I think. Those of you who know nothing of Facebook, I'm sure this sounds like gibberish, because it kind of is... you're really not missing much....but admittedly one is able to connect with people literally around the country whom you might not have seen or heard from in years...and with whom you may never have connected without this social media network phenomenon.

I pay the most attention to the periodic theological musings posted on Facebook, and of course the theologies posted are all over the spectrum: from abject fundamentalism to atheism. Most of it is quite naïve and uninformed, but some of it very intelligent. I have a cousin in Dothan, who is one of Katharine's facebook friends who challenges the traditional religious ethos...he considers himself an agnostic...and Katharine has a cousin, a facebook friend also, who is continually accusing religious institutions of doing more harm than good...like endorsing wars, excluding classes of people, remaining mute on issues that affect people's well being.....both of them are well informed and represent to me a growing movement of skepticism towards institutional religion in this country....I think that is healthy...Unfortunately, and what our two cousins and many others are challenging, is what passes for Christianity popularly in our culture...they're challenging a gross misunderstanding of what passes for Christianity, and rightly....you know: the decidedly supernatural male God aloof in the heavens....who from time to time enters our world and performs some miraculous act...and at other times is decidedly absent...One child saved from cancer another not so fortunate...one person spared in the tornado and the one next to him dead...and then the millennial question: If God is a loving God, why would God allow evil in the world?.....and then there's the notion of Jesus as a peripatetic magician....., raising the dead, walking on water, changing water into wine, multiplying food.... So I think

this questioning trend is quite healthy to tell you the truth...I think we all need to nourish in ourselves a healthy agnosticism...Not to walk away from religion, but to ask, to challenge honestly the important questions of life and faith in the context of Christian community...to seek with integrity the truth of scripture...I believe there is profound truth in scripture...but it isn't always easy to find, and some of what we read in scripture we must simply write off...one has to work at becoming biblically literate and one must be imaginative to apprehend the truth in scripture...one must be able to recognize the different genres of literature these diverse writers and theologians are proposing...is it myth or legend...poetry...historical narrative...sarcasm...humor...rhetoric...parable...or even fantasy. The writers and editors of scripture are using a variety of arts to make their theological points as to our relationship with God...for example, the feeding of the five thousand a decided metaphor for our call to share God's abundance up and against the mindset of scarcity...walking on water...a retelling of the creation story...that the church represented by Jesus is to be an ordering force, an ordering presence in our world...about the business of creating as God created in the beginning, calming the proverbial waters of Chaos...to take these stories literally is to quite miss the point...and the church still in many places abdicates its duty to study and teach and in short tell the truth...and people of conscience, the truth seekers aren't going to buy into falsity any longer...they will no longer check their brains at the church doors. They want relevancy and meaning now.

Our parable today is a perfect example of how we can get it wrong, and have got it wrong for a long time... Influenced powerfully by what I call popular Christianity in the west born of our predominantly puritan roots: You just heard the story: A King is throwing a wedding party for his son; none of his elite friends will come, in fact they rough up his messengers who issue the invitation, even killing some of them; the king takes revenge and goes on a killing spree and burns the town; then invites the street people, the riff raff to the party, but he sees one improperly dressed and binds him hand and foot and throws him out into the night...every commentator I read and every sermon I've heard on this passage say, I daresay through the neurotic lenses of Augustine and Calvin, still alive among us, that the King is God, the Son is the Christ, the wedding banquet is the final consummation of heaven and earth...but people are too busy pursuing earthly things and therefore they miss out...all are called but few are chosen...so we, we better watch out and heed the call of this God our king, and by the way, arrive properly dressed.

Who would worship such a God....A God who capriciously judges, murders and reeks havoc out of anger....and invites many but chooses few to receive his hospitality....the church has used this passage over the centuries to exercise fear and control, taking its cue from empire....and indeed that is what our reading today is about...It is about the ways of empire (and a clarification here...you hear me speak of the gospels challenging empire a lot...so by empire I don't mean a specific nation per se...I mean by empire collective corrupted power that oppresses....so a nation can choose to act like empire or not) ....Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king....compare can also mean contrast...holding two things up together to discern the difference...This passage is about the capricious brutality of empire and the hierarchical exclusivity of the social order up and against God's realm...Matthew in the words of Jesus is saying what God's kingdom is **not**...the reference to troops and murder and the burning of the city would instantly remind the hearer of the calamitous attack and razing of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem in the year 70 by the Roman general Titus...exerting the power of Empire...No, here is an example of what the kingdom is not.

And yet, in this parable Matthew gets his point across still that there is an urgency to trust the way of Christ, to come to the heavenly banquet breaking into our world as we speak....parables act that way...they are multidimensional....sometimes slippery and contradictory.

So I would like to say to my dear agnostic cousins, and my dear agnostic friends, my dear agnostic children...and the people I meet around town who say... "I'm agnostic...but if I came to church I would come to All Saints." I wish I had a nickel for each time I've heard that. I want to say, We don't leave our doubts and our questions at the door...we offer them to God via the community of truth seekers, the community of questioners....the community always on the verge of discovery, on a pilgrimage of discovery... and I'll promise them, promise you that the search will not go unrewarded....because there is a golden thread that wends its way throughout scripture that speaks of a God who rejects no one....a God who pours out God's life for God's beloved people and for the world they inhabit... a God not aloof in the stratospheric ether, but a God among us celebrating our joys, and grieving among us in our hardships and sorrows...a God who invites us into a way of love for our world so that the world will be made new, changed for the better, changed into the way God intends it....a world at peace....a world in which all are equals...in which all have dignity, in which all live lives full of meaning....a fascinating life of discovery, our minds becoming the mind of Christ....a life of being enfolded into God's

very love of the universe that lasts forever...a world in which nothing is rejected or lost, in which all manner of thing is redeemed.....And I would tell them also (a plug for the church)...that we humans have an innate need to celebrate such a God in praise and in song, and in prayer and a family meal...food, as it were, for the imagination...It is beauty that animates the imagination.... A world in which All are called brothers and sisters, and all are enthusiastically chosen no matter who they are or what they've done... and by the way, don't worry about the dress code.