

Proper 23 Year A 2014

“ disturb our barren peace and call us to another feast where only love may rule.”

Another parable... Matthew has Jesus on a roll here... this parable we read just now is a bookend to the one in the previous chapter we read last week.... a story, from everyday life that causes us to think about what the kingdom of God looks like... This is a relatively famous parable, one with which we are familiar... One that has mostly, at least as far as I have heard, been interpreted as follows:... Now I won't paraphrase the interpretation. I'll read you a homilette from another church bulletin that I get each week... another Episcopal Church at that: “This weeks gospel points to the reality of God, the King's open invitation to be loved, and of the weeping and gnashing of teeth that takes place when we refuse to accept that we are accepted... See you at the banquet.” That's in fact popular orthodox theology.. a theology of the convention of the church... Indeed Augustine and Calvin espoused such a theology... that God loves us as unmerited as we are; and to refuse such love is to invite God's punishment.... In my book, that's a formula for spiritual psychosis.

So let's look at the parable... you know about parables... they are stories taken from daily life, sometimes allegorical, always with a twist... a story parallel to life, offering a new angle, an unseen perspective... parables are meant to tell the listener in a fresh way something about the truth of existence, and in the case of Jesus' teaching, something about what the kingdom of God looks like.... a reality check, as it were...

So there is a king who invites guests to a lavish banquet... the would be guests refuse and abuse and murder the messengers of the king... the king goes into a rage and kills the murderers and burns down their town.... He invites the riff raff to the feast and still in a rage throws out into the night a guest not properly dressed... Now the king in ancient lore is a conventional symbol for God, and one would think that this would be a teaching on how God acts, but not necessarily so with the way of parables.... The king reacts to the pathos of the story with anger and capricious vengeance.... And then the twist... he even throws out the innocent street man not wearing a wedding garment... the listeners would recognize the burning of the city as a reference to the Roman's sacking of Jerusalem which has occurred just a few years before the writing of this gospel... The kings behavior, in short, is anything but godlike... if this is the way God is then you and I are just wasting our time here Sunday after Sunday.

This is a story about what the kingdom of God is not.... The parable artfully turns on its head... the kingdom of God may be compared... may be contrasted... with the raging king.... Matthew here again just as in last week's parable is decrying the cycle of violence that permeates our world. Mary hit the nail on the head in her sermon last week.... The murderous vineyard workers are killed by the murderous landowner... nobody wins, only the cycle of violence is yet again sustained to beget more violence, and so it goes... the kingdom of God is meant for the ones who do not rule as the world in its convention rules... nonviolently, graciously, generously... the citizens of the kingdom of God live in mutual collaboration bearing the fruits of love to our world, a world in which violence has no place....

In my mind the two parables we just heard render the term "just war" to be the absurd oxymoron that it is... violence will accomplish nothing, no matter the justification, except to beget more violence... and until we confront the violence of our culture, and the poverty and despair that engenders it, we will be done in... gone in the course of time, the way all empires go, swallowed up by history... destroyed by the violence that gave birth to it. When we say the confession... when we say forgive us for the evil done on our behalf... substitute the word violence... therein is the gist of today's parable.

Matthew is painting the picture of a way of life that is unconventional radical, revolutionary... the church over the centuries has sugar-coated the gospels... made them palatable for the very powers that be against which the message of the gospels stands... that's a dilemma for those of us modern citizens of the first world who are relatively well to do... the status quo for us is not so bad.... Convention, generally speaking has been good to us... but brothers and sisters the call of the gospel is still radically the same... we are called to live the unconventional ways of love.... Offering all that we have and all that we are for the good of our world.... It's asking a lot to be sure. It is asking everything of us.... But what else is there in our brief moment in time? When convention fails, the American dream, the pursuit of perfection and happiness, manifest destiny.... When all else fails... What else is there but to love... the only thing we will ever be remembered by is... how we loved.

And do not doubt, friends, love is controversial....It stands against the status quo, the way of the world, as it were... the way of tit for tat... of keeping account... Love is a conscious act of the will that chooses compassion over vengeance, justice over oppression; It chooses forgiveness over hardness of heart; peace instead of war... It is patient and kind and forbearing... and open and inclusive.... And honest, and courageous....

Love is a process at which, as people of faith, God's people, we must excel, lest the kingdom of God in its springing forth languishes... Everything in the gospel of Matthew is leading up to the 25th chapter in which Matthew makes the stunning assertion that the raised body of Christ is seen in the marginalized of our world, the ones whom God has given us to love... the hungry and the thirsty, the imprisoned and the sick, the dispossessed and the abused.... They are part of us, and without condition they have a place at the banquet table, and unless they come, we are all the less for it.

Love is a choice.... Not a feeling but a choice... A choice to be about the process of serving.... About the process of preparing a lavish banquet for all who might come... preparing a banquet with all that we have... that's what love does... because there is nothing else left to do really... but sit down with our kin and eat,

So brothers and sisters go into the streets in love... be the controversy that changes our world.... Invite all to the feast of the world's redemption at which there is exquisite food and drink, and enough... quite enough... and, never mind the dress code.