

Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14; Pentecost 19A; 10/11/20
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I am really exhausted by the chaos, the perpetual lies, the brokenness, the dysfunction, the hatred, the stoking of racism and white supremacy, the despair, the gaslighting, the lack of care for neighbor, the abuse perpetrated on the American people, the grief, the sorrow, and the increasing number of deaths from this virus, all of which seem endless as they impact our lives on a daily basis. So, I found the readings we are given on this day to be medicine for my soul as God again breaks into our present reality with a message that can **only** come from God.

In our first reading from Isaiah, the prophet shares this vision of **another** reality, the final future, God's final future. Isaiah was writing to people who were suffering and experiencing despair. Writing after or close to the end of Israel's tragic exile to Babylon, he presents this apocalyptic vision of hope to weary people. Isaiah describes a future messianic banquet that is all about God and God's love for **all** people.

I think mealtime is always an important event, and meals are a vital component of celebrations. Meals are integral elements of milestones such as weddings and funerals, which involve life's **larger** story, changing life's direction and meaning not only for those most intimately involved but also for the wider community. Thus, mealtime is so much **more** than just food.

And, throughout scripture, the table, the meal, the banquet, and the party repeatedly serve as metaphors for God's activity in the world.

Isaiah shares this marvelous vision of God's final future and does so by describing a feast. He describes this **universal** banquet that will take place on God's holy mountain. This extravagant feast is for **all** peoples. **All** nations will gather together as **one** for this magnificent celebration. And, what a feast it is! It features the very **best** foods and wines. In my mind, I envision steak and lobster, a good glass of cabernet, and all sorts of gourmet, delectable dishes! It is the ultimate food and wine festival! God serves as the extravagant host of this party and God spares **nothing** to make this a **lavish, luxurious** banquet for **all** peoples. But Isaiah's vision does not end there. You see, God's plans extend even further because even death itself will be sent away and defeated, and **all** who mourn will be comforted. This is such good news today! The shroud of death that is cast over **all** people **will be gone** because **God will swallow up death forever**. There can be no grander promise than this, and the promise could not be more universal. God will destroy death and wipe away **all** tears! Such words of promise and hope are lifegiving, so needed in this present time. With so much death presently permeating our lives, I long for that day when death is swallowed up forever.

Today, Jesus **also** tells a story about a great banquet. And, quite honestly, this is a bizarre story! In fact, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, calls this the “worst parable ever!” I tend to agree with her. Nadia also talks about how you often need to turn your head a thousand different ways to make sense of Jesus’ parables because Jesus does not define the characters for us. We are not told “this person is God,” or “this person is Jesus,” or “this person is you.” Quite honestly, Christian literature includes many different people throughout history taking a hack at Jesus’ parables and coming up with any number of possibilities that help reveal deeper truths. And, truthfully, we need to see the characters interpreted in a variety of ways so we can grow in understanding.

Anyway, Jesus has already told a few stories after entering the temple and being questioned by the religious leaders about his authority. His first two parables were intense, but this third one is downright extreme. Jesus also ups the ante by beginning with the lead in or teaser, “The *kingdom of heaven* may be compared to...” Well, with these words he gets the attention of the religious leaders! Anyway, Jesus begins by saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” Now, the immediate kicker is that no one who is invited to the party comes. Huh? The king, a person to whom

nobody ever says, “no,” suddenly is not even getting RSVPs! People simply are not showing up. And this is only the beginning of the absurdity.

So, the king sends out his slaves with a message of good food, good smells, and good company with the king. Some of the people laugh and walk away, while other people kill the king’s messengers. Then, the king throws a king-sized hissy fit – kills the people who were invited but did not show up, and he burns down their city. After this horrific behavior, he sends his slaves out to invite everyone, good and bad, so he can fill the wedding hall with guests. Finally, when one man comes and is **not** wearing a wedding robe, he has him bound hand and foot and thrown in the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

Frankly, one horrifying aspect of this parable is indeed the king and his actions. It is really hard to make sense of this parable and there have been multiple interpretations where, astoundingly, the king is God. That is even more troubling. So, for these reasons, I am going to share Nadia’s telling of this story. She writes:

Our parable for today is a real doozy. Here’s how I heard it: A king throws a wedding banquet and invites the other rich, slave-owning powerful people. Seemingly unimpressed by the promised veal cutlet at the wedding feast, the elite invitees laugh at the invitation and proceed to abuse and then kill the slaves of the king. Well, then the king kills them back. But he doesn’t stop there, not to be outdone, he burns down the city... and it is there amidst the burning carnage of the newly destroyed city that he sends more slaves to go find

*whoever they can to fill the seats. After all...the food is ready and he has all these fancy robes for the guests. All he cares about is having every seat filled at his big party. But who is left? He burned the city. The rich and powerful have been murdered so it's the **regular** folks wandering the streets looking for their dead, picking apart the charred debris of their burned city who are then told that they have no choice but to go to the party of the guy responsible — and it's already been established that he doesn't respond well if you turn him down. So, the terrified masses show up and pretend that this capricious tyrant didn't just lay waste to their city. Out of fear they all dutifully put on their wedding robes given them at the door and they pretend. Slipping on a gorgeous garment was what you did for a king's wedding feast. And the guests got to keep the outfits, just a little souvenir of the king's generosity – and a reminder to keep in line. You don't get anything from the empire without it costing you a bit of your life.*

Well, our story ends with these well-dressed survivors looking on as the King spots the one guy at the banquet who isn't wearing a wedding robe. And when the innocent man has nothing to say for himself the king has this scapegoat hogtied and thrown into the outer darkness. "Many are called but few are chosen" he says.

Wow!! Nadia's interpretation of this story blows *my* mind, but I like where she is going in her interpretation. First, we must remember that Jesus' audience lived during a lot of upheaval and turmoil. They lived under the thumb of the Roman empire. They were no strangers to moody tyrants burning cities. That was the kind of thing they feared. And, at the time when Matthew wrote his gospel, Christians **were** being persecuted and Jerusalem **had** already been destroyed. Furthermore, as we look at the king in this story, we must remember that the God we worship in Jesus Christ is **not** a powerful king, but a servant. Jesus does not kill his enemies

and burn their cities. **He** is the one **killed** by his powerful enemies for refusing to go along with them. So, Nadia concludes by saying:

*...the kingdom of heaven is like: a first century Jewish peasant who laughed at the powerful, kissed lepers, befriended prostitutes and ate with all the wrong people and whom the authorities and the powerful elite had to hog tie and throw into the outer darkness. ...the kingdom of heaven is like Jesus. And what if it is from this place of outer darkness that everything is changed? It is in the outer darkness of Calvary where **death is swallowed up forever.***

Friends, the tomb of Christ has **already** swallowed up death forever. Jesus, in his life, ministry, death and resurrection defied the usual world order and empire, and Christ's defiance of the usual world order sets us free! We live **into** the reality that Christ has **already** swallowed death. Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the risen, universal Christ draws us into **life** right now! Because of Christ **we** can defiantly sing our "alleluias." And, as St. Paul says, we can rejoice in the Lord always because the Lord is truly **near**, even in the depth of our present experience. And, the peace of God, which **truly** surpasses all understanding **will** guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Yes, the tomb of Christ has **already** swallowed up death, and we have been set free to rise up and defiantly live into God's **new** reality! So, rise up and live!