

Sermon for Sunday, October 11, 2020 - "The Nonviolent Way of Jesus"

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The other day my family and I got a wedding invite from a friend we haven't seen in years. In normal times I'd feel honored that we were remembered and included. But during a pandemic, I wondered why we made the guest list when weddings need to be small right now in order to be safe. I quickly replied with our regrets. Being invited to a wedding isn't *always* an occasion for joy.

The same was true in the ancient world. Sometimes wedding invites were a problem because kings and rulers used weddings and big feasts as opportunities to demonstrate their power. These feasts were not just celebrations they were chances for leaders to say, "Look at how many people support me. Look at how many come at my beck and call to prove their allegiance to me and my family". Such weddings were more like modern political rallies than they were like our cake cutting, chicken dancing, bouquet throwing celebrations. Well, more like political rallies on steroids actually. If you attended a royal wedding, you were showing your support for the ruler. If you declined an invitation you could face death. That seems to be what's happening in the parable today.

The traditional interpretation of this parable is that it is about God and about salvation, but I'm not so sure. Jesus tells this story about the kingdom of heaven not as an explanation of who will be saved and how, but in answer to a specific question about his authority after he challenges the powers that be. Also, when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven he isn't talking about where we go after we die, but rather about God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven and the ways that coming kingdom challenges this world.

And as Jesus begins telling the parable he says, "The Kingdom of Heaven **may be compared** to a King who gave a wedding banquet for his son." He doesn't say the Kingdom of Heaven **is like this** as he does in other parables. Many scholars wonder if Jesus isn't trying to compare and contrast God's kingdom with all the rulers of this world and all the violence of this world.

Let's consider this story from that angle. The king in this parable seems to be on fairly rocky ground with his constituents. He looks to be as unpopular as the Roman oppressors of Israel or the puppet kings Rome put in place, like King Herod. This king sends out a group of slaves to summon the people he's invited to his big feast - all the big wigs in the kingdom. When none of them show up, he sends a second group of slaves saying, "Tell them *I have prepared* my dinner, my oxen and fatted calves are slaughtered and everything is ready. Come to the wedding."

Everyone knows the ruler hasn't prepared the dinner himself. Such work would have been done by the slaves in his house toiling for hours. But, this personal style and this second invitation suggest the king is trying to send a strong message: By refusing this invitation you are personally

refusing me; you had better come. His second call is both inviting and threatening. Some continue to just ignore the invitation but a larger group curses and kills the king's slaves. Basically, they carry out a political revolt. And, Jesus tells us, the king is enraged. He sends out his troops, destroys the rebels and burns the city.

Then the king sends his slaves out again to gather up other guests. The slaves are told to go out into the main streets and bring in anyone they find. On the one hand this sounds great - all sorts of people are invited to a feast. But in reality, the people the slaves meet on the streets are likely running in fear. Their city and their houses have been set on fire. When they are "invited" to the feast they don't have much choice but to come, or they too will be killed. And so, they come and they meet the needs of the king. The gathering hall is filled, proving that this ruler can still command popular support.

But one man at the wedding registers his disapproval of the way the king is carrying out his business. This man shows up at the feast, but he doesn't put on the wedding garment. He has not engaged in the political rebellion and the killing of the king's slaves, but neither will he support the king's violent demonstration of power by putting on the garment of celebration. When he's asked to defend himself, he remains silent. So, he's bound by his hands and feet and thrown out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He is thrown back into the dark night of a city whose streets run with blood. He is thrown into the weeping and gnashing of teeth caused by a ruler who sent troops into city streets to compel obedience. He refuses to endorse the ways of oppression and so is sent out to be with those who are suffering its effects.

When the kingdom of heaven is compared to this banquet, it doesn't look like the king. It looks like someone who chooses a different way to respond to the violence of our world. The kingdom of heaven looks like Jesus and the nonviolent way of Jesus, the suffering servant.

Jesus tells this story after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and after he has driven the money changers out of the temple. After these politically disruptive acts, the leaders are concerned. The scribes and the chief priests, who work for the Roman appointed king Herod, ask Jesus, "By what authority do you do these things?" They are trying to get a sense of how Jesus will respond to the powers that be in his day.

Many want Jesus to be the victorious Messiah who will wrest power from the oppressive Roman rulers, by the sword if necessary. Others hope he will not upset the fragile balance and power by challenging Rome and causing Rome to come down hard on the people. The leaders who ask Jesus about his authority wonder which side he will take. Jesus chooses neither side. Instead, he invokes the image of the suffering servant, an image from another time of oppression in Israel's history. When Israel was in exile after being crushed by Assyria and Babylon, the prophet Isaiah told of God's servant who would restore Israel not by violence or domination but by another way, the way of nonviolent resistance.

And soon after telling this parable, Jesus acts like the suffering servant and like the man at the wedding without the celebratory garment. When he is examined by the rulers of the world, he is speechless. He does not defend himself; he does not engage. So, they have him bound by hands and feet and thrown into the outer darkness of crucifixion and death.

Jesus takes his place out in the darkness with all those who weep and gnash their teeth, all who long for life and for our world to be different, all who long for an end to troops in the streets and

cities burning. He takes his place on the cross and endures all the pain and brokenness of our world. He shows us that his way is to be in the midst of suffering, to be with all who weep. In this way, Jesus destroys death's power to separate us from God and one another. For not even death can now separate us from God.

In his teaching and in his life, Jesus offers all his listeners a vision of God's kingdom. And this vision challenges and calls all of us who hear, not just those who live under Roman rule but all who live in this world. We are called to both resist oppression *and* avoid violence, including angry and hateful words. We are called to bear witness to God who is not a tyrant but rather a suffering servant to God who, as Isaiah tells us, sets a feast for all people and wipes away every tear from our eyes. We are called to stand with those who are cast out into suffering and violence and assure them of God's presence with them. We are called to trust that God is at work destroying the power of death.

We are also assured of Jesus' presence with us in taking this different path, even though it is difficult. Jesus is with you and me as we see and experience the suffering of the world, as we weep and gnash our teeth and long for things to be different, as we choose our leaders this election season.

You are not alone, beloved of God.

Christ Jesus, the suffering servant is with you.

There is no suffering we experience that Christ Jesus does not share.

And nothing, not even death, can separate you from God.