

For the People of St. Philip's Parish. October 9, 2005  
Proper 23, Year A  
Maria Hoecker, preacher.

I'd like to continue this morning exploring another of Jesus' mysterious parables. Once again we're confronted with attempts to describe the indescribable, The Kingdom of God. This parable, as are many, is edgy and unexpected. Tales of Weeping and Gnashing of teeth gets my attention every time.

Here we have the strange story of the king who held a wedding banquet for his son. The invited guests would not come, so the king sent his slaves out to bring people in from the street. Then he seems surprised to find a guest who is not dressed "appropriately," and he orders the slaves to bind the man and toss him "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Parables do work on many different levels. On the surface we might think that this is a rude, unkind man, full of him self, who abuses his power as a king. But we know that parables point to a deeper meaning. This scene seems unjust, if it weren't for the opening sentence of the passage: "Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: 'the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.'"

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...a wedding banquet. Whenever I come near this table draped in white fair linens and adorned with silver and brass, I feel that I'm at a wedding banquet. Our Eucharist is a celebration of our unity in Christ, *our* marriage- if you will -between Christ and the Church. It is a sacred union, just as the Trinity is joined by love in relationship, so are we joined eternally with Christ as One Body.

What we see as we come to this Table is one side of a very long banquet table which stretches back into eternity. This Heavenly table might also be draped with the finest linen, adorned with exquisite silver, and laden with life-giving food. At our end of this table are seated those of us gathered here today, but perhaps at the other end of the table is the Host—Jesus himself, and in between on either side of the table are all those who have gone before—those from all the tribes and people, and nations who have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd. The ones of whom Jesus spoke when he said, "I have other sheep who I will bring into my flock. That's what I imagine when I see the Kingdom of God as compared to a wedding feast.

Today's *story* of a wedding feast starts out in a seemingly normal way, but quickly changes when the guests refuse to attend the party. That is so unexpected, why wouldn't *everyone* want to be at this party?!? We know that the religious leaders who were hearing Jesus' parable had refused to accept his invitation, we know that Jesus is directing this parable to those who will murder him. So there is a connection between the kingdom of heaven and all people being invited in—this makes sense, as all are welcome at this table. But then the king turns on one of the guests. Does this King

represent God? This speechless man, probably poor, from the streets, isn't dressed in appropriate wedding clothes. So the king has him bound and thrown out into the darkness. What does this say about the kingdom of heaven? For many are called, but few are chosen.

Let's say it like this. At our Wednesday Bible study group Mary Jane came up with this interpretation in her reflection of the Gospel. What if: Many are called, but few choose?

On the surface of this parable it seems as though the man is being thrown out because he isn't an insider at the party, we assume that perhaps he didn't know what to wear. So many were invited. But perhaps this speechless man *chose* not to fully participate. As in many cultures, hospitality was very important. Feasts, clothing, and shelter were offered within the community, and there were expectations that it would be freely received. It was a means of survival in the desert. It would have been unforgivable for guests or hosts not to honor the ancient desert tradition of hospitality. Being cast out into the outer darkness as punishment can be very frightening if you live in a climate that is inhospitable.

Perhaps that was the point. Jesus often made uncomfortable comparisons in his parables. He is challenging the assumptions of his listeners, who were the religious leaders of his tradition. Jesus is shocking them with an unexpected story. Earlier in the journey, Jesus told his disciples that parables were a way for insiders to understand the deeper meaning of God's mystery. Insiders, were typically few in number, Insiders weren't the religious leaders of the day. Insiders were ones who *chose* to go deeper into the mystery with Jesus. They listened deeply to God's call and chose to follow Jesus.

Jesus punches our perceptions. The kingdom of heaven is not like the king or the banquet or the guests. Kingdom of heaven is beyond our expectations, beyond our assumptions, beyond what we can analyze and think through and wrap our brains around. This is not to say that we should not think or try to understand the history of Jesus' time. It is only to say that there is always more than what we can see. As dwellers in the Kingdom of God we will always be surprised, we will continually be confronted with the unexpected. The point for us is to try to be open to more surprises, we simply can't rest in the comfortable assumption that we know God's will.

In the book of Isaiah, it says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." This does not mean we are stupid, it only means that we are human and our knowledge and our understanding are limited. Even though we contain a spark of the divine, even though we are made in God's image, we are not God. The most we can hope for in this lifetime are glimpses—through story and scripture, through prayer and meditation, through our experiences. If we are open to the Spirit, if we listen, if we pay attention, we can catch a glimpse here and there of the kingdom.

These are the glimpses Paul speaks of in the Letter to the Philippians, when he says, Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence

and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

These are all things of the kingdom. Paul might have added to this good list “whatever is surprising, whatever is unexpected.” It is often through those things that God speaks to us.

I invite you to hold on to the image of this our banquet table which reaches back through all eternity. We are surrounded by all the company of heaven. This is our wedding feast, we are called together through Christian hope. We hope for the unexpected in Christ, but it is up to us to chose.

Resources:

Sermon of The Rev. Kathy Wayfield, Proper 23, year A.

Sermon of Canon JoAnn Ford, Requiem Mass for Rick Hoecker, August 10, 2005  
New Interpreters' Bible