

19 Pentecost, Proper 23, Yr. A

October 15, 2017

Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

It's been said that scripture is like baklava, that wonderful Greek confection of philo dough, honey, nuts and butter. Apparently, a good pastry chef can pack the dough into as many as 120 layers. It's a good metaphor for the Scriptures which are often also multi-layered; capable of being read on many levels and capable of speaking to us, over and over again, differing depending on where we are at the time. That's especially true of parables and today we heard another one from Matthew, the third in a row in which at least one interpretation is that Jesus is challenging the Pharisees who are convinced that they're the "in" crowd and, therefore, refuse to open their hearts and minds to Jesus. A word of warning about that, though, which probably goes without saying, and that is that these Jesus vs. the Pharisees scriptures were often read as Jesus against the Jews and hence, as anti-Semitic. That's a totally wrong reading, however. Remember that these conversations were between two Jewish groups – the Pharisees and the Jewish Christians. It's important to remember that because these scriptures have been misread and misused.

That having been said, I think that the consistent theme in this morning's readings – all of them, including the psalm – is the theme made explicit in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's about attaining that peace which passes all understanding and the joy that comes with that peace. It's about not worrying, it's about knowing that we're accepted and that God's in control. Part of that peace comes with the realization that God's Kingdom, that state of affairs which would exist if God were running the show, is already among us, even in the midst of suffering and tribulation. And that vision of the kingdom, far from being some pie-in-the-sky abstraction, gives meaning and direction to our lives here and now, shedding light on our present reality and giving us direction in our daily lives. And it's also the promise of that future time which anchors us in hope.

Look first at the reading from Isaiah. This was written at the time when the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom and at a time when Isaiah could see further disaster looming. Yet, because he trusted in God, he could deliver a prophecy that was about hope beyond the present and threatening suffering. If you read it carefully, you'll note also that it's a prophecy, not just for Israel, but for ALL people. While Isaiah doesn't use Kingdom language, that's what he's talking about – that new heaven and new earth, that world where there won't be hurt or destruction and where the shroud of the threat of death will be removed. He uses the metaphor of a lavish banquet; again, a feast, Isaiah says, for ALL peoples.

We hear echoes of this in the psalm. Trust in the shepherd: even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, even in the midst of enemies and turmoil, it's that trust that brings us confidence and the peace that passes understanding. The psalmist also uses the setting of a banquet and sings of being surrounded by the goodness and mercy of God.

And then there's the Matthew reading. We've been talking a lot about context lately and I think it's worth noting that this same parable appears in Luke, but Luke leaves out the stuff about the king sending troops and destroying the murders and their city. Commentators think that the

difference is that Matthew was writing shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and, as one of them said, that traumatic event was seared into the retinas of the Jews who experienced it. Luke's telling is also a bit lighter – the excuses given by those first invited are legitimate – you'll remember them because they're part of a camp song: I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow. But the gist of it is the same: everybody's just too busy to bother.

An obvious reading here, of course, is that those initially invited, for whatever reason, decline. And, again the surface reading was aimed at those Pharisees who refused to recognize that the coming of Jesus was the breaking in of the Kingdom. Thanks, but no thanks, is the reply. I would suggest that the deeper level has to do with the universality of God's grace and of God's offer of salvation. Go out, the king tells his servants and invite everyone in. Matthew says that they invited everyone they found, both good and bad. It would be a motley crew, wouldn't it? All races, all colors, all denominations, all physical and mental capabilities, all ages: they would have been a diverse bunch, but also a surprised and grateful bunch. Probably even a joyful bunch. Robert Capon, writing about this parable says that the only determining factor seems to be the king's desire to have a full house. He further suggests that this parable is really all about God as the generous giver of grace and that entry into the Kingdom is a free gift – we do works of course, but those works follow out of gratitude for the gift. But the key is that the gift is offered first and need only be accepted. Capon goes on to talk about the fact that that acceptance is hard for those of us who think we can make it on our own merits – like that little bit of Pharisee that exists in each of us. We think our merits should be rewarded. He has his own metaphor, which involves going to a used car dealer with \$265 in our pockets. Just when we've decided it's not enough and we're going to give up, the salesman comes up and takes us around to the back where there's a brand-new Porsche. "It's yours, for free," he says. "The boss just likes you; here are the keys." And our response to this? Hmm. Must be too good to be true, so we walk around the car and kick the tires. We slam the doors and jump on the bumpers to test the shocks. And then, if we DO decide to accept the car, our temptation is to fret about whether, if our no-good neighbor came in here, he might be offered a Rolls Royce instead. The kind of grace and generosity of God is hard for us to get our minds around.

This ties in to that final sentence, "Many are called, but few are chosen," which some Bible scholars think is a later addition. The whole trick here is that we have to be willing to recognize that God is so generous and that grace is being offered without a catch. To me and to everyone else. All we have to do is accept it. So I wonder if perhaps that last line would have more meaning and be more consistent with the content of the rest of the parable if it read: ALL ARE CALLED BUT FEW ACCEPT. There's another echo here, and that's of the story of the prodigal son. You'll remember that elder son – he was invited, but as far as we know, he was so incensed that his brother was not only allowed in, but celebrated, that he couldn't bring himself to join the party. I'd like to interject something here, which came out of a recent conference on racism. One of the women there told the story about something that happened at the Pig. Apparently an older woman was having trouble reaching some apples. A clerk, who was a person of color, came along, saw that she was struggling and reached up and got the apple for her. But, in response, she refused to take it because, she said, "I can't take it now, because you touched it." There was another fellow working in that aisle who observed this, came over, put his arm around the first guy, and told the woman what a great fellow worker he

was and what a good friend. He reached up and got an apple which, I assume, she took. I found that story appalling, thinking, as I do, that Door County is close to perfect. But it's an illustration, perhaps of that attitude that would refuse to enter the kingdom if the wrong kind of people were there. But note also, that there's goodness in the story, in the actions of the second worker.

And then there's that line about the wedding garment and the fellow who showed up without one and was cast out. There are a couple of rabbinic tales about wedding garments and about the tradition that the giver of the feast would pass them out to guests. In that case, failure to wear one would be a sign of, what? Ingratitude? Defiance? But there's also another interpretation. And that is that the wedding garment stands for a righteous life, sort of like the white baptismal garment that new Christians would don after their baptism, to show that they were now committed to a new way of life, a kingdom way of life, a life transformed by putting on the mind of Christ.

And here, Paul's words to the Philippians are instructive. You'll remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison, so he knows first-hand what he's talking about when he talks about joy and peace in the midst of tribulation. Like Isaiah, Paul is taking the long view. Whether you put it in terms of the Kingdom, or use the metaphor of a banquet, both of these writers are saying the same thing: Trust in the goodness and grace and love and providence of God. What can you say about someone who, facing death, tells his followers, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And then, having done that, resting in that trust, you will have peace that passes all understanding. And in the rest of the letter, Paul tells his readers what the life of a follower of Jesus looks like – what a life that's illumined by the understanding of God's kingdom, what life in that baptismal garment, or that wedding garment looks like. FINALLY BELOVED, WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS HONORABLE, WHATEVER IS JUST, WHATEVER IS PURE, WHATEVER IS PLEASING, WHATEVER IS COMMENDABLE – Keep on doing these things. We've been given the grace to live these transformed lives. The challenge is to accept it and then live it out. Amen.