

Pentecost 19 Year A
October 15, 2017
Church of Our Saviour Mill Valley

Exodus 32:1-14
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

At the Bishop's visit this summer, Archdeacon David Stickley and I were talking in the sacristy about how Episcopalians don't like their services to be very long. One hour, tops, and preferably shorter. Some without music. David laughed and said "But they better get used to it, because when they get to heaven they'll be worshipping God all day!" I stared at him silently for a long time as I thought "Hmm. What are my other options?"

And I kind of had the same thought this morning when we read "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son..." And then we hear what one commentator called "a Horror Story". My first thought is, "oh, the kingdom of heaven is like this. OK, where's the turn-off for that other kingdom?" Because, for me, just like David's depiction of the afterlife, I don't think I want to go to that kingdom. And for years I have heard this story preached that the son is Jesus, and the king is God. But read that way, I would be hard-pressed to recognize a God that I have come to know in the teachings of Jesus: a God of justice, a God of mercy, a God of love, and that God's spirit flows through us to be a people of justice, a people of mercy, a people of love. So I have to ask: What's really going on here? And should we be picking this story apart and hear it speak to us in new ways?

Last week, Br. Richard Edward's take on that other story about the wicked tenants who keep killing anyone who comes to collect the landlord's share of the produce was that it was an indictment against the violence of oppression. I think we might be hearing again today that violent oppression was a given in 1st century Judea. Who was Jesus speaking to in this story? At the close of last week's reading we hear: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet." I think that maybe Jesus is still talking to them in this parable, and we should be careful about which role we assign to whom.

What if the king threw this party, expecting everyone to come and pay homage, and if they didn't he would kill them all and burn their cities, all while keeping the food warm for the next batch of invitees? What if their refusal to attend the banquet was a protest against their oppression, a "just say no" to enforced gaiety, and the additional expense of having to buy a tux in order to attend when there wasn't even enough to feed your family?

What if it's Jesus who is the one who shows up without the proper attire? Picture him standing before Pilate, bloodied and silent, wearing a crown of thorns, and a robe that was thrown over him in derision, "Oh, look, you think you're the King of the Jews? You don't look so kingly now, do you?" Picture him now at the wedding banquet, wearing nothing but his simple tunic, to face whatever may come in order to stand up for his oppressed people.

Jesus' protest against the establishment that oppressed the people and rewarded itself with an unjust portion of the people's labor was not a protest of violence. He had no problem speaking truth to power, but the most violent he ever got was overturning the tables of the money-changers in the temple and setting a few doves free. So the idea that this man, and the God he serves, would be slaughtering his people and destroying their cities just because they won't come to his party or wear the right duds just doesn't sound like the God Jesus has been telling us about.

But it DOES sound a lot like the chief priests and Pharisees who collaborate with the Romans so that they can keep their positions of power. It sounds a lot like them when they invite everyone to the temple, but only if they pay the proper price, which they then can pocket.

But these stories aren't just for the people of 1st century Judea. Two thousand years down the road, if that's all they spoke to we might as well be studying Harry Potter for our spiritual growth. Jesus has shown us how to live and how to treat all those who journey this life with us. He has also warned us not to worry about the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the log in our own. In our modern society we see the growing economic inequity in our own country, and our people with burdens too heavy to bear, but we tell ourselves we are powerless to change it. When a black man kneels in protest that his country is treating his fellow black citizens unjustly, he, and those who support him, are told that they should be, essentially, "bound hand and foot, and thrown into the outer darkness".

This has been a horrific week for all of us, but, obviously, for some more than others. I would be willing to bet that everyone here has a story

to tell, a friend or relative who has lost everything, and may even be sheltering those who have been evacuated or have lost their homes. A friend of mine is doing her best to shelter large animals on her ranch, and offering her home to those who need shelter. She is posting pictures of the happy horses and donkeys who have found safety with her. I know you know people like that, maybe you are one of them. Everywhere we see evidence of people doing what they can to mitigate the suffering of those affected. Donations of goods have been coming at such a fast and furious rate that evacuation centers are saying “Thanks, but please stop! We can’t handle any more donations!” Church of Our Savior has offered to be put on a list to take 10 evacuees if needed, and the parish has stepped forward with a commitment to feed them when they get here. Guy Fieri, the celebrity chef, is cooking for the residents of the evacuation center in Santa Rosa.. Big Box stores are packing up supplies for people and shelters. It seems there is no end to the goodwill and generosity to people in their time of need.

And yet. There are dark days ahead. And there were dark days before this catastrophe happened. The week before we were marking yet another mass shooting, and seem paralyzed to stop the culture of gun violence, or a culture that preferences a strange reading of the Second Amendment over Christ’s command to love one another.

I work with homeless programs. At least 1300 of our brothers and sisters in Marin County were homeless before this latest event. Homeless because we couldn’t bring ourselves to build an adequate supply of affordable housing or support the community mental health systems and

supportive housing that would prevent such large numbers of people to sleep on the streets. And then complain because they are doing it. Because we didn't want "those people" to live near us, we didn't want to do anything to "our" property values. Even those people who work in our communities, our teachers, nurses, postal workers, grocery checkers, housecleaners and gardeners, had to commute long distances to work in our communities, clogging our freeways, polluting our air, and destroying their family time. And many of them are now left homeless.

Where is our church in this? How are we to respond as Christ would have us do? Jesus was a power disrupter. Yes, he fed the five thousand, healed the sick, but he also spoke truth to power. He also protested against the principalities and powers that oppressed the people, the systems that benefitted the few at the expense of the many. The church has sanitized this message. Since the time of Constantine it threw its lot in with the imperial powers that kept them safe, and kept them from causing too much trouble. The message was "suffer now, so you can reap your rewards in the afterlife". It twisted the message so that faith became a list of beliefs to qualify for membership rather than the words we hear in Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" This gospel story in today's reading has been used to continue this twisted message of walking the narrow path to an afterlife, and ignoring our responsibility to live in the kingdom of heaven in the here and now.

The great Phyllis Tickle, the Episcopalian religion writer, in her book "The Great Emergence", says: "Every five hundred years, the church

cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale.” At today’s forum, following the 10 o’clock service, you will hear Dryden Lyddle and Br. Richard Edward talk about that last rummage sale that happened 500 years ago at the start of the Reformation. This morning I’d like to open the conversation about our current rummage sale. Our times are ripe for it. The events of the last few weeks have put the condition of our society front and center in ways we can no longer ignore. But how will we respond? How will we, as a church, respond? Jesus didn’t ask us to think small. I think we have been thinking too small.

This winter we will go to the REST program in San Rafael and serve dinner to our homeless brothers and sisters. Once a month our parish cooks and serves lunch at the Mt. Carmel hot lunch program to the homeless and marginally housed. Both these events, I believe, are an appreciated respite from a difficult life. But it isn’t enough. It’s not enough to pat ourselves on the back and say “See what our church is doing?” Because we aren’t changing the systems that make these conditions possible. If we were really changing those systems we might have to be uncomfortable. We might have to relinquish some of our power. Our positions might not be popular. We might be thrown into the outer darkness.

How we respond in the days ahead to the fires and their aftermath, to the shootings and their aftermath, to the decimation of the Affordable Care Act and its aftermath, to our abandonment of the Paris Climate Accords and the Iran Deal and their aftermaths, to our provocations with North Korea and its aftermath, will tell us a lot about with whom we are throwing

our lot. Will we be the power disrupter that Jesus was? Will we be the one at the party wearing a tunic?

It's been five hundred years since our last rummage sale. What are we going to throw out? What will we keep?