The Secret of Being Well-Fed

October 9, 2005 (Proper 23, Year A)

Isaiah 25:1-9 Psalm 23 Philippians 4:4-13 Matthew 22:1-14

In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.
(Phil 4:12-13)

After the uplifting vision of the banquet Isaiah's holy mountain, which Fred read, after singing together the comforting words of the 23rd Psalm, with its delightful banquet of overflowing cups after hearing Phyllis read the irenic conclusion of Paul's letter to the Phillipians, I have to go walk in the midst of you all and upset the agape feast by saying *`Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* It is like serving up a fine feast of rich food, and then serving bitter lemons for dessert!

Especially if you have been taking in the news of the terrible earthquake in Kashmir, the deaths of tens of thousands of people, why do we have to endure Matthew's harsh language? We need the comfort of Isaiah's vision of a holy mountain for all peoples, where the shroud of death is removed for all nations, for India, Pakistan, Kashmir, and Afghanistan; a reminder that God is "a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm…."

Where is the comfort food inside Matthew's capricious feast? Matthew's version of this parable has a lot more roughage than the version in the Gospel of Luke or the ancient, non-canonical Gospel of Thomas.

Luke and Thomas both have the same great supper, the original guest list declining the invitation, rejecting relationship, and the host's response of even greater generosity, inviting in multitudes of rich and poor, bad and good. But

Matthew adds in three disturbing scenes – the murder of the king's servants, the king's response to that murder, burning cities to the ground, and the expulsion of the poorly-dressed wedding guest.

Theologian and activist Daniel Berrigan argues that Matthew's parable is a *comparison*, a contrast to the kingdom of God, rather than a *likeness* of God's kingdom.[1]

In the reign, the empire of God, the banquet is for all peoples and all nations, a holy mountain where all tears are wiped away. In the empires of this earth, all invitations are dangerous; no matter who the emperor invites to dinner, somebody is going to get punished.

In the empire of God, people may choose to refuse the invitation, but God is relentless in inclusion, out on the highways and hedges seeking out guests. In the empires of this earth, pride and shame reign supreme – it's about having the right clothes, saying the right words, having lots of people for the photo opportunity, but not caring about who they are. The empires of this earth care about status and glamour, rather than justice and right-action. Nouns, rather than verbs.

I know that I had once been taught to believe that every time Jesus tells a story about a king, the king must *always* be a symbol for God! But is this capricious, prideful, violent king the symbol for God in Matthew's version of the parable?

I'd like to propose a radical idea: perhaps God is the poorly-dressed wedding guest! The God which we know in Jesus, who is not only groom but guest. The Word of God who was silent, speechless before the condemnation of Pilate, who was thrown out of the city of Jerusalem for not conforming to the nouns of Empire and Religion, and hung on a cross where there was certainly wailing and gnashing of teeth!

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[1] "A parable for today, if not tomorrow - the parable of the king's banquet" National Catholic Reporter, May 4, 2001 by Daniel Berrigan. Reprinted at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_27_37/ai_74511424

Matthew has taken the beautiful vision of God's great feast, and inverted it, turned it upside-down. Where Luke sets this parable at a dinner table, with Jesus teaching a mixed crowd of well-off and poor about the generous manner of God's hospitality, and how we should copy that hospitality, inviting both rich and poor to our table… Matthew sets this *inverted* parable at the end of Jesus' condemnation of the priests and elders at the temple in Jerusalem.

I believe Jesus is saying "Here's the kind of hospitality you're showing – you, and the Roman Empire you collaborate with. When people shame you by refusing your invitation, you react with hurt pride and violence. And when you try to be generous, inviting in the poor and lame, you turn those vulnerable people into victims of your pride. You bring in a poor man, homeless and destitute, and then upbraid him for not being properly dressed!" Jesus is the wedding guest, but the powers and principalities of the world do not recognize him because he is not clothed with worldly glamour – and so they cast him out of the city.

But gathered here in Auburndale, around this holy table, we have the opportunity to live out Isaiah's vision of a great feast. In Kashmir and in New Orleans, in Newton, and here at 1900 Commonwealth, we are invited by God to take our place as guests and servants at God's table.

Over the years, in this parish, through PIP, in our diocese in the ecumenical and interfaith work in Newton, we will have the opportunity to set a table for those in need. We can choose to throw a dinner party like the one in Matthew's gospel – exclusive and petty, worried about the quality of our guests. Or we can throw a party like the one in Isaiah, abundant, generous, full of laughter – and with an invitation list that seeks out, and keeps safe, <u>all</u> people.

What does that party look like? Here's another parable, a true story that gives us a glimpse of that holy banquet:

St. Gregory of Nyssa is an Episcopal church in San Francisco. Like Messiah, St. Gregory takes liturgy seriously and joyfully, and the Eucharist is at the heart of all they do. They have a second celebration as well, which they see as a direct extension of the Eucharist: a food bank. [2] Every Friday, and one Sunday afternoon a month, the *altar* (not a back door or the rectory or a basement room, but the altar in the sanctuary) is surrounded by tables and tables of groceries, and what was once a small pantry out now meets the needs of hundreds of families, giving out three tons of food at a time – to every one who comes, no questions asked.

When I visited St. Gregory's, a deacon there told me that several years ago, St. Gregory's Food Bank received several hundred-thousand dollars – turns out they had been listed as one of the charities in the settlement of some corporate tort case. St. Gregory's took this windfall, and *gave it away* to a half dozen other churches in the neighborhood, so that they could start food banks too!

Matthew's parable shows how philanthropy, charity, the work of justice – can be done simply for the photo-opportunity; when someone too poor or speechless or inappropriate or demanding shows up, he gets chucked out. But Isaiah points to another kind of justice-work, a joyful celebration, inclusive of *all* people, foolish in generosity, trusting *only* in God. The kind of wedding feast where we join in the words of the hymn, singing

> *This is the Lord's house,*
> *home of all God's people,*
> *school for the faithful,*
> *refuge for the sinner,*
> *rest for the pilgrim,*
> *haven for the weary;*
> *all find a welcome.*[3]

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[2] http://www.saintgregorys.org/Community/Outreach/FoodPantry/index.html

[3] Hymn 51, "We, the Lord's People" Hymnal 1982, Words: John E. Bowers (b. 1923), alt.

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