

Praise from Prison

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

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I've never liked the parable of the King's Wedding Feast, the reading that we heard today from the Gospel of Matthew. Even after seminary and learning that this parable is an allegory, it still doesn't resonate for me. But, however we feel about such things, it is important to understand these stories in the context of which they come. Otherwise we can easily misunderstand and literalize something that was never meant to be. And, we are surrounded by a world that too often does exactly that.

Scholars point out that this parable is one of a set of three, this one being the last, all about Jesus responding to various challenges of his authority.

At the time of this Gospel narrative, the early Christians heard this story as the King representing God, the wedding feast being Jesus entering into and transforming the world, the slaves sent out to invite the guests as prophets and missionaries, and the burning of the city as an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. At that time the average person believed that this recent and traumatic event was God's punishment upon ancient Israel for not accepting Jesus and the Gospel. It is an early example of the anti-Semitism that has been a part of the Christian story ever since. And, especially in a political campaign year, we can still find that "we – they" judgment rhetoric in pockets of Christianity even today.

And our location in society also affects how we hear the story. If my ancestors had been slaves in this country, I'm sure that I would hear the mention of slaves – especially as a seemingly accepted part of the social order of things – in a more visceral and negative way than I already do now.

When these "slaves" go out and find guests (both bad and good) to fill the hall for the banquet, this represents all those – bad and good – in the church at that time. The writer of the Gospel of Mark is earlier concerned with false prophets and disciples in the church as seen in parables of weeds among the wheat (13:24-30, 36-43) and rotten fish among the fresh ones (13:47-50).

It is one of these "bad" guests that is not wearing the proper wedding robe. And, on the surface, this feels so wrong – why should someone be punished for literally being rounded up off the street and not having the right attire?

But, in an allegory, the wedding feast represents the age to come. The required garment is righteousness – or behavior in accordance with Jesus' teachings. The punishment or judgment is against someone who accepts the invitation of the Gospel, but then never makes any changes. Not unlike publicly joining AA while still drinking in secret.

These explanations may or may not make sense to us, but either way for me it still feels a little unsatisfying. Like being told to find comfort in the Bible, and then stumbling upon this verse, which I experience as less than comforting.

And especially now. These are anxious times. War and rumor of war. Foreclosures and financial freefall. Cuts and deficits. Finger-pointing and mud-slinging.

We struggle to find comfort anywhere. And, surprise of surprises, we just might find it from our namesake, St. Paul. This is the same Paul who so often is so very sure of himself – convinced, claiming authority, and rarely humble – that we hear of today through the words *“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.”*

So, just what is going on with Paul? There seems to be a good-old-fashioned church fight going on with the words *“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.”* He doesn’t take sides as he often does, but simply encourages them to work it out.

Eugene Peterson, in the preface to this letter to the Philippians in his translation of the Bible called The Message, writes:

This is Paul’s happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious. Before we’ve read a dozen lines, we begin to feel the joy ourselves – the dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us.

But happiness is not a word we can understand by looking it up in the dictionary. In fact, none of the qualities of the Christian life can be learned out of a book. Something more like apprenticeship is required, being around someone who out of years of devoted discipline shows us, by his or her entire behavior, what it is. Moments of verbal instruction will certainly occur, but mostly an apprentice acquires skill by daily and intimate association with a “master,” picking up the subtle but absolutely essential things, such as timing and rhythm and “touch.”

And he continues:

*When we read what Paul wrote to the Christian believers in the city of Philippi, we find ourselves in the company of just such a master. Paul doesn’t tell us that we can be happy, or how to be happy. He simply and unmistakably **is** happy. None of his circumstances contribute to his joy. He wrote from a jail cell, his work was under attack by competitors, and after twenty years or so of hard traveling in the service of Jesus, he was tired and would have welcomed some relief.*

As I was reading this introduction one phrase in particular seemed to leap out from the page: *“He wrote from a jail cell.”*

Like others who have followed – Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, or present-day Aung San Suu Kyi living into her twelfth year under house arrest by the military government of Myanmar – their letters and writing do not on the surface feel like “prison.”

Confinement. Anger. Resentment. Bitterness. That is what I imagine about being in prison. Do we hear any of this in Paul’s words? These adapted words put to music in the bright and uplifting melody of today’s opening hymn? “Rejoice, Give Thanks and Sing!”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Is it a paradox that it is in prison when Paul seems to finally find that peace which surpasses all understanding?

Happiness in confinement. Wisdom in captivity. Praise from prison.

Often in contemporary Christianity we hear of different ways to be happy. We are told of a prosperity gospel. Or we are made to feel guilty if we don’t adhere to the party line. It is often a self-absorbed faith, and one where not everyone is welcome at the table.

And in our contemporary world where we are told so often that we deserve every possible thing that we desire, that we need to buy certain things to be truly happy, that our physical bodies and attractiveness are never quite enough, or that when we have a national calamity our duty is to go out and shop.

In this contemporary context we have much to learn from these folk who have reached the height of their creativity or the depth of their souls in prison. How paradoxical. How counter-intuitive. How surprising. And how very much like Jesus.

“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. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Amen.

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”