

A Clash of Opposites

I like bumper stickers. I don't want to have them on my own car, but I'm glad that other folks have them, because I enjoy reading them. I remember once, at a red light, the beat-up old car in front of me was plastered with stickers. Two in particular caught my attention. One read, "Question Authority" and another one read "Question Reality." I thought it would be fun to add another one between the two that read, "Question Bumper Stickers."

Normally, I don't look to bumper stickers for theological insight, but this week, I did. I'll explain. The gospel reading of the wedding banquet is a rather difficult parable. Some of you may be familiar with Liberation Theology, which is theology done mostly by the poor and oppressed people in the southern hemisphere of the world, in particular Central and South America. It is a theology that believes the gospel is the good news of setting us free, liberation – especially for the poor and marginalized and oppressed. It proclaims that the Bible shows God is consistently on the side of the poor – the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, the people of Israel, Jesus preaching to the poor. One of the foundations of this kind of theology is what they call "a hermeneutic of suspicion."

Hermeneutic means a way of interpreting things; Biblical hermeneutics looks at how we interpret the Bible. So, a hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to the Bible, means that we ought to question the way Bible interpretation has always been done. We don't need to take someone else's word for it, even if they are a scholar or a preacher. To put it in bumper sticker language: Question the way you read your Bible. To be a faithful Christian, you need to question how you read your Bible.

Let's apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to today's gospel lesson. But first, I will review the story, in what is usually the standard interpretation often found in sermons or commentaries. Jesus said, "There was once a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." Many have usually taken this to mean that king in the story is God, and God is throwing this great feast for his Son, Jesus Christ. Some say Jesus is the bridegroom, the bride is the church, and the great banquet is in heaven. The king sends out invitations, and then sends out slaves to call everyone who received one, but the guests do not come. The king is persistent and sends the slaves again. "Look," they say, "the king has made everything ready; a great meal has been prepared. You must come." Again, they refuse, preferring to go back to their farms and businesses. Some people even mistreat and kill the king's slaves.

The king is furious. So, this time, he sends out his troops to destroy the murderers, and burn their city to the ground. He then tells his slaves, "The wedding is still ready, but those I invited are not worthy, so go out into the streets, get anyone you can find, and invite them in here. So, they go out onto the streets and gather everyone, good and bad, and they fill the wedding hall.

When the king arrives, he notices a man who was not wearing a wedding robe. The king asks, "How did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man is speechless. And the king says to his slaves, "Bind this man, hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I have heard people claim that the wedding robe is symbolic of the baptismal garment, and therefore, if you are not baptized, the king declares "you're out." Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

That's the standard way of interpreting this, and frankly, I'm not wild about it. I can't help but think of the hermeneutic of suspicion as postulated by the liberation

theologians. I think back on those bumper stickers. Question reality. Question authority. Question how we have always interpreted this parable. I would like you to imagine hearing this parable the way a first century peasant in Palestine might hear it. From the side of the poor, from the side of the oppressed.

Let's start with the character of the king. One might assume that the king in this parable is God, but Jesus never indicates that. In fact, this king is depicted as being very different from the compassionate God that Jesus is always talking about. I suggest that Jesus, when he is talking about a king in this parable, he just may be talking about... a king!

In those days, kings were not well-loved. In fact, they were usually feared, because kings were often powerful, violent, and oppressive rulers. Remember the story of King Herod following Jesus' birth: Herod ordered the killing of all young children in Bethlehem. Israel had a long history of kings who behaved like that. Also, kings were typically very wealthy, and they stayed that way because of the ruthless oppression of the poor. Most people in Jesus' day lived in poverty. Well, this king decides to throw a lavish party for his rich, powerful prince, complete with fatted calves and the whole works. And he invites lots of people. Guess what? No one wants to come. The king sends slaves to say, 'Hey you, you had better show up.' But again, they refuse and knowing what kings were like, who can blame them? They would rather go about their business and tend to their farms. There is even a bit of an uprising of the common people in which they revolt and kill some of the king's slaves.

The king becomes outraged. And in his anger, he sends out troops – not servants – but soldiers, to go out, kill the troublemakers and burn their city to the ground. Now I can picture a king doing this. We have watched the news of the war in the Middle East, and we have witnessed leaders and prime ministers and today's kings doing

precisely that. But that does not sound like the God of love that Jesus called Abba. It doesn't sound like Jesus, who said love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It doesn't sound like the father in the story of the prodigal son. It doesn't look like Jesus' words to his own persecutors and killers, when he prayed at his crucifixion, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing." No, the king in this story sounds more like all the kings that Jesus' listeners knew about and suffered under, the kings that the world's history is full of: a cruel, merciless, vindictive tyrant.

Well, the king is determined to throw his party. That upstart city is still smoldering after the king has torched it, and he commands his slaves. "The banquet is still on, and those who were invited are not worthy." Again, think about God. Since when did worthiness or unworthiness ever stop God from inviting anybody? Really. The God of grace always tells us, "It is not about your worthiness. You are my beloved child, I love you, and I declare you that you are worthy." But *this* king declares there will be no second chance for those who offended him. "These people are unworthy, so go out and get me someone else. Go into the streets and bring everyone in here. I am not going to have a party for my son, and I will not have the place empty; I've got a reputation to uphold."

The slaves go into the streets, and gather people, good and bad, to come to the banquet, in order to fill the wedding hall with guests. And notice what this king does. He has just gathered all these people in, literally off the streets, and who does he notice? One poor guy who is not wearing a wedding robe. A guy who came in because he was told to. If he was a poor person, he probably didn't own a wedding robe. He may have owned only one or two pieces of clothing. "How did you get in here?" the King demands. The person is speechless. What could he say to the king?

“Your servants brought me. I was hungry and hoping for a meal. I’m sorry I don’t have a dinner jacket.”

This king is not going to have a poorly dressed guy ruin his son’s party, so he tells his servants, “Bind this man hand and foot and throw him into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Bind him, the king says, and cast him aside. Bind him and cast him aside. If there was any question about this king being God, I suggest this is the last great clue that he is not. God is always, always the God of liberation. God is the one who sets the captives free, who led Israel out of slavery. Jesus is the one who proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon to proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives.” Jesus sets people free. Jesus is the one who opens the eyes of the blind, and loosens the tongue of the mute, and who tells the lame, take up your mat and walk.

I think Jesus offered this parable to show us that this is how the world works. This is how the systems of the world operate. And in that system, many are called but few are chosen. Look at Jesus’ life and teaching. Did his love extend to only a few? This story teaches that the kings of this world care mostly for themselves. The systems of this world will burn you if you insult it. And even if it invites you in, don’t think that you have any security there, because it will just as easily toss you out the door if you don’t play by its rules. Jesus is saying, do not serve *this* king as your master. Don’t even accept the invitation. Because you will not get peace or freedom or security serving this king. In the end, the kings of this world will bind you, and toss you aside if it serves their purpose. There is no mercy here, no setting people free. And there is a reason why, after hearing this parable, in the next verses, the religious and political leaders immediately went out and sought ways to destroy Jesus.

Sometimes, to illustrate what the kingdom of God is like, it helps to point out, by contrast, “and here is what the world does.” Sometimes we need that clear light to show the contrast of opposites. As Christians, we live in a place of opposites: within the world as it is, and within the kingdom of God, the way God desires the world to be. This very day, we pray for peace and work for justice, while wars are raging, and innocent people are killed. Our central symbol is the cross, and that too, is a place of opposites: a place of death and at the same time, new life; the cross where Jesus received hate and violence and returned only love and forgiveness. Jesus shows us in his life, and death, and resurrection, how to live in the kingdom of God, while we also live in a world with powerful kings and violent leaders. Jesus shows us how to be instruments of hope and light and peace in a world that deals in darkness and destruction.

There is good news even in this troubling parable and in our world. To find it, ask yourself where Jesus would be found in this story. Ask where Jesus would be in our world today. Jesus would probably be found eating in the home of one of the farmers or business people rather than a palace. Jesus would be there on the street, hanging out with all those who are labeled “unworthy.” Jesus would be with the poor guy after he was booted out for having the wrong clothes. He would be there to unbind the person’s hands and feet and spirit. Jesus would be there to say, “Even if the world brings you trouble, I am here with you always. Even to the end.” And yes, Jesus would be at a banquet, but it would be like this communion feast, a place where God’s grace names us as worthy, and where everyone is welcome.

“There is a God,” Jesus tells us, “who offers grace and hope and freedom. There is a great feast, called the kingdom of God, where all are invited.” O God, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.

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Proper 23A – 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

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

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