

“God’s Two-Fold Problem”

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First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Isaiah 25:6-10

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

I want to ask you to keep this image from Isaiah 25 in your mind, as I read this next Scripture reading for the day, since it would seem that with the promise of a free, exquisite banquet meal, complete with the end of death and the wiping away of all tears by the finger of God’s own hand—well, it just seems that would be something people, people like us, would want to hear about. And if we got a personal invitation, it seems that we would want to go...

SECOND READING: Matthew 18:21-35

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, mistreated 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.”

If you were here on Sunday night during our days of spiritual refreshment, then you heard John Todd preach a marvelous sermon on Mark 5—the story of the man, or the demon, named Legion. And to begin that sermon, John told it two ways. The first time he told the story with all of the troublesome parts removed—the Bowdlerized version, as he called it after Thomas Bowdler. And the principal part that he omitted was the peculiar and somewhat puzzling part about the pigs. Jesus sends the demons into a herd of 2,000 pigs, which immediately rush down to the sea and are drowned.

But the pigs are there, perhaps as John said, to remind us of the cost of mission—is it really worth 2,000 pigs to put one man’s life together?

And today, it seems to me that there are some pigs that we have to face in this extended, three-part parable that Jesus tells.

Only instead of pigs, this time it is a burned city, destroyed people and words about “binding hand and foot,” “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Now indeed the pigs are there in Mark 5. There is no way around that. But if we focus all our attention on the pigs, as my mind would be inclined to do—why are those pigs in this story? What is the point of letting those demons have their way even for a second, all those kinds of thoughts—then we miss the main

point of Mark 5. A man utterly hopeless is healed. A man utterly hopeless is healed! That is worth all the pigs, which was John's point. But not to his neighbors, who thought the price too high, so they asked Jesus to leave.

Now in this story today from Matthew, I am suspecting that some of us are going to be so tempted to zero in on that smoldering city, those dead murderers, the weeping and gnashing of teeth that we will miss the main point of the story—there is a king trying his best to have a wedding banquet. The king didn't wake up and say that he thought a bunch of people ought to be killed. And he didn't wake up with an itch to go burn someone's city. So if you are convinced that God is out to punish you or that God does not love you, or that God is out to reject you—then I want to plead with you to walk past that herd of pigs and stay with the story. Stay with Jesus. Because while the pigs are there, until you see the point of the story, you will mistake your own ideas for what Jesus is saying.

And let us remember that Jesus never burned down any city while he was here visible in the body. He never rejected a single person for not being "good enough" for the Kingdom of heaven. And he never bound up anyone and threw them out into outer darkness. It is true that he says words like that here—and he has a reason for saying it, to be sure—but he is not saying for the reasons we may be inclined to impose on this story out of our own fears and past religious experience in church. It is important, crucial in fact, to stay with what Jesus is actually saying.

And what Jesus is saying is that there was a king who was spending enormous time and money to have a an unforgettably good banquet fears and to invite people to come—all for free.

Free food, free alcohol (Presbyterians can rejoice that one day...) and the end of death and sadness. A party that not only is fun for a few hours, but a party that celebrates the end of ever feeling bad again. How good can this get?

And, of course, that makes for the first set of real pigs in this story, namely, why people don't come. Why? Why in the world would people not come to the banquet of Isaiah 25?

I have belabored this point, because what I want to remind everyone is that it is not that the people invited failed to pass some test at the door. They didn't ask to come in but get a "no" from God.

No, people are actively invited—all for free—and they are the ones who decide to reject the invitation and certainly not the case that they weren't "good enough" to come, not in the sense of who is worthy or not worthy. It is strictly at the level of who wants to come and who doesn't.

And why would anyone NOT want to come?

So, let's let go the imaginary pigs of assuming we are all going to be burned by God for our unworthiness and round up the real pigs of why in the world anyone would turn down a completely free, completely amazing meal.

Imagine being invited to the best restaurant in Paris, all expenses paid, to the best meal that Parisian cuisine can offer. Imagine being invited by the Presidents of the US and France and any other nations you care to name. All expenses paid, remember.

And you decide not to go.

Can you ask yourself why you or anyone else wouldn't go?

I can only think of a couple of reasons, really. And the problem is that I can think of these two reasons very quickly, and they might just be enough for me not to go.

First, I may have gotten a peek at the guest list, and I don't like being included with the people that are being invited. Or in Middle TN terms, "if you think I am going to go sit down around a table and pretend that I like those people, you have another thought coming."

This is precisely, of course, what Jesus has said about the Pharisees. "The prostitutes and the tax-collectors are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you," Jesus says just a few verses earlier. It really doesn't matter what Jesus says is the reason. The very fact that the prostitutes and tax-collectors, much less the Gentiles later on, are coming to party is enough to keep some people away.

Can you imagine anyone that petty? To refuse to come to a party, because of who else might be there?

Well, actually, yes I can. All too easily.

Which leads to the second reason I can imagine not coming to an all-expenses-paid party at the best restaurant in Paris...I don't like the one who is going the inviting.

Now it may be nice that the meal is free, but if I don't like the host, I am probably not going...and in this case, the reason why people seem to not like the host of the banquet is because he fails to respect the difference between my dignity and your dignity. I belong up front at the dais, not at the table with the serving help. Even more, the people invited to this banquet are irritated that the king seems to have more interest in the serving help than the respectable people. Jesus says that the first will be last and the last first. This won't be a party where you can tell who the most important guests are.

It will be a major replay on a cosmic scale of the inauguration of Andrew Jackson, when the Tennesseans showed up to the horror of the fashionable people of Washington, DC. It is still a story found in the history books, the day the Tennesseans showed up for an inauguration of a president of the United States. They were cooking bacon on the White House lawn and the corn whiskey was flowing. And people overstayed the official time allotted. Jackson was seen as a backwater clown by many from that point forward.

To be associated with a President who loves those kinds of people and gives them access to the best of the best? What kind of President is that? What person in their right and respectable mind would be associated with Tennesseans?

You see that is a parable of the Kingdom of heaven where God invites everyone—EVERYONE, all for free—but some people take it as a bad joke, a farce, a waste of time and energy to even bother with that kind of event. And if you press them to say why they are not coming, then they may let their real feelings out, which is that they resent the implication that they would be expected to associate with any part of this kind of event. Whether invited or expected, they want no part of this kind of open-handed generosity or this kind of insulting and degrading spectacle.

But the truth is that the Kingdom of God is that open, open to anyone, and people are invited for free, and the people who are invited feel crowded by a belief that God's goodness can transform anyone because God's goodness is the only reason anyone has what they do. But some people don't see it that way, and this invitation would assume that they see it the King's way. And they just don't, and they don't appreciate anyone who implies they should see it that way is asking for trouble.

This is the unmistakable herd of pigs, this problem that the King has with a group of people—all because he set out to invite them to a free banquet. This is the first of God's two-fold problem with us as people. We don't mind a free meal, but it has to come to us on our terms, in ways that make us feel better about ourselves than we feel about some other people and it has to indicate that God respects us more than God respects someone else.

And God refuses to play those ego games with us. But our egos can either lead us into ignoring or rejecting the invitation to a free banquet complete with salvation from death and sorrow—or lead us into hostility to the very idea that if God is going to lower God's standards that far, to include and even to welcome the likes of "people like that," I'll tell him what he can do with his invitation.

So, the story of God's grace and mercy could stop there, with a firm, "not interested" or an even firmer, "how dare you!" from the people who should by all odds best understand exactly what party they are being invited to attend.

But God's grace won't stop.

So, the king sends out his servants to invite in the very people that the first group of invitees feared would be invited all along. The first invitees were right about this, because the King wants a full house, not a few choice guests, so it was inevitable based on the attitude of the King that the "great unsaved" would be invited.

But the invitation to everyone goes out, and if you have been chasing imaginary pigs in your mind, thinking that somehow you are not worthy of being invited by God, if you think that someone you are not worthy of the Kingdom, then here is the part of the story for you—only there are no pigs here. Not yet.

Because the King instructs the servants to invite anyone and everyone they can, and horror of horrors in the minds of the Pharisees in Jesus' presence—"both the good and the bad" are invited and welcomed.

The worst fears are confirmed. Jesus thinks sinners can be saved rather than admitting what we all know. Sinners must be shunned and rejected, otherwise moral standards count for nothing.

But Jesus is undeterred. He actually agrees that human moral standards do count for nothing, because they are shadowy covering for human ego and human pride, for human hatred of other people.

And this is the moral of the first part of the story. Anyone whose religion is just a cover to hate or despise other people is going to have a head-on devastating collision with the Kingdom of Heaven, because the Kingdom of Heaven is God's work to save and embrace the very people we may most enjoy despising—and daring to call ourselves God's people while we do it.

So, no, God is not into cruelty or despising of other people, much less having it done in God's own name. And the proof that this parable is not a Pharisee parable in Jesus-clothing is the fact that the good and the bad are there. The king is fine with that, because the wedding will itself take care of what needs to be changed—in everyone invited. That brings us, at long last, however, to the last greased pig in this story. The man with no wedding robe.

Aha! See the wedding really isn't free, after all, our egos whisper. See, God is just trying to get you to eat crow, all while God is going to be measuring your every fault. It's a two-fold humiliation. First, God tells you to be happy and to love everyone. Then God lowers the boom on you and throws you out at the first minor infraction. That's what our egos whisper. wedding robe, after all.

Does this man really need to be bound hand and foot and thrown into hell over a wedding robe?

But here's the second part of the king's two-fold problem. First, God must convince us to walk past our egos and maybe our fears to join the wedding feast.

But the second problem is just as daunting. Once we get inside, we may start to act just like the first invitees, only interested in what we can get for ourselves rather than actually joining the wedding feast.

Wedding robes came in two forms. One was the robe that any Jew would wear during any Jewish feast. A simple white robe called a kittim. They were the ultra-simple part of any Jewish wardrobe. They were the least expensive, least flashy, least fancy article of clothing imaginable. They were meant to deflect attention from the wearer onto the event of the day. In this case, a wedding. The other form of the wedding robe was this: a free white robe, in case you couldn't afford one. And, in fact, in the case of a royal wedding, the guests would have all received one at no cost. At NO COST.

So, here we arrive at a dilemma for the king, whose only intention was to throw a free meal for everyone in joy and celebration over his son, and the guests either take offense at the invitation, for utterly indefensible reasons, or once they are invited, they start to act as if the party is only for them and everyone else can just fend for themselves. At the very least, the man with no wedding robe is an incredible ungrateful guest. He is eating food he does not deserve, but he is in such a rush to grab whatever he can get for himself that he can't even slow down long enough to offer even minimal respect for the generosity that has brought him to the table.

He is the guest who is invited to a wedding without an invitation but simply because the bride and groom felt compassion for him, only to see him rush the food table and eat the wedding cake with his bare hands while ordering the servers to bring him better food and something stronger to drink.

Selfishness is an ugly, ugly thing against the backdrop of divine grace and generosity.

There is the pig, the real pig, in this story that no one can ignore. The first herd of pigs is tragically gone by their own selfishness and cruelty. And now this man decides that he prefers his own private party to a wedding feast of free food, free drink, the end of death and the end of suffering—for everyone.

And sadly, there is a man with no wedding robe in me. I would rather just be invited to a private lunch with the king, or better yet, be sent a gift certificate in the mail for one massive lunch just for me and my few friends at the best restaurant in Paris. What the king, what God is trying to do for everyone, is less important than my own ego, comfort and private sense of importance.

God has a massive two-fold problem with us human beings. We receive a free invitation and find ways to make it all about us. We receive God's goodness and decide it is a reason for greed.

But thanks be to God, the wedding feast is still set. The hall will be full. God's grace is relentless, and human selfishness will not stop its music or its joy. The question is in no way about human worthiness, only about divine generosity and human willingness to accept the free gift without demanding to replace the Son as the guest of honor. For after all, we don't ever pay one cent of the cost of the party, while the Son, the Son paid the full price for us, at the cost of his own life.

Thanks be to God the Father, Father of all mercies, and to the Son, the Giver and Source of all grace and joy. And to the Holy Spirit who delivers God's invitation to the banquet of all banquets, to each one of us and to everyone in our world. Amen.