

Sermon  
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: EXODUS 32:1-14; PSALM 106:1-6, 19-23; PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9; MATTHEW 22:1-14

The Gospel of Christ. This is what we just heard \_\_\_\_\_ proclaim after reading the parable of the wedding banquet from Matthew's Gospel for us. This morning I find myself thinking: Really? Is what we've just heard – the anger, the violence, the binding hand and foot, the outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth – is what we've just heard the Gospel? Is this the good news of God's love made known in Jesus? The Gospel is more than what we've just heard from Matthew's Gospel...and that's the point.

I've mentioned to you before that parables are not allegory. Each part of an allegory relates to the larger, unwritten meaning of the story. Parables are not as orderly. The fit between story and meaning is not as complete or exact and it's not meant to be. A parable is a story that starts on familiar ground – a king, a wedding banquet – and then catches us completely off guard.

Parables invite us into paradox. They invite us to enter into and to allow ourselves to be stretched by inconsistency and contradiction. In that stretching we are changed. Our perspectives are reshaped, and we see something new.

Our world is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Full of conflict and violence. Full of words and actions, encounters and events that catch us off guard. The way we engage with parables is practice for how we are to engage with each other and in our world.

There is a significant part of me that wants to reject this parable as Matthew tells it. That wants to say: No. Not this. Yet there are many who are bound hand and foot in our world. There is darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. How do we acknowledge this? How do we reach out those who are suffering without letting ourselves be pulled into the darkness and overwhelmed by it? We do it by holding onto the hope we have as followers of Jesus that there is another way. A kingdom way. A way of love. Holding on to hope, to light and love, isn't easy when

the darkness threatens to overwhelm. It's a stretch, we are stretched, but in that stretching a new perspective, a new way, comes.

Our reading from Exodus: the Israelites are waiting for Moses to come down the mountain, and he is delayed. This waiting stretched them, and they didn't like it! Instead of staying in the stretch – in the unknowing – they come up with their own solution: a golden calf. Moses has his own stretch in response as he holds God's anger along with the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel, and out of this stretch there is a change of mind.

Our reading from Philippians is a reminder of what we are to hold alongside the anger, the darkness, the violence in our world. We are called to rejoice. To let our gentleness show. We are reminded to maintain our connection to God while the challenges of this life stretch us.

I went through a typical "wilderness" period in my teens. While I didn't stop going to church, I struggled with the idea of faith. I had doubts about the story of God's love that we are invited into as Christians. In the middle of this struggle, I met Diane. Diane was a member of my congregation. She was a nun, and she was one of the most devout people that I've ever met – both faithful, and "faith-filled". She had some health issues, and she walked with a cane. Her devotion to God, to Jesus and the gospel, and to the working of the Spirit in her life overflowed out of her. She exuded joy and energy, and much of this energy had gone into social justice work in her life. I liked her very much, and I admired her, but sometimes, when I looked at her, I wondered how she could believe so wholeheartedly in God's love. I wondered where she found this "faith". Sometimes I'd wonder if Diane was kidding herself. I'd find myself thinking that her faith was just like the cane she walked with, helping her to get through life without falling over from the meaninglessness of it all. In particularly intense moments of doubt, I'd even feel a little sorry for her that she needed that to get through life. Then, one day, as I sat on a city bus, I looked out the window, and I saw Diane, walking down the street. When I looked at her, I had the most profound experience of revelation. It was as though time was suspended. When my gaze first rested upon her, she looked just the same. She was using her cane, walking purposefully, and smiling, as usual. My mind began to turn over the usual thoughts I had about faith when I looked at Diane. As I continued to look at her, though, I was suddenly overcome by the realization that her faith was no crutch. I saw, in that moment, that she had made

her hands Jesus's hands in the world, her feet were Jesus's feet, and her walk was a gospel walk. As I looked at her face, I saw the face of Jesus in it. For Diane, faith was a different way being in the world.

In the puzzle – in the stretch – of this morning's parable of the wedding banquet we have the man who was not wearing a wedding robe. The harshness of the king's response is jarring, it gets our attention. And it's meant to! We are meant to ask ourselves what this means, and to be stretched in this asking. This wedding garment has proved troubling to every generation of interpreters. Augustine saw it as love; Luther scoffed at those who saw it as anything other than faith; Calvin tweaked it to mean both faith and works.

Sam Wells points out that in the early church, listeners would have heard robe and thought only one thing: baptismal robe. He says this:

“Baptism meant not just a ceremony with words and water, but also a new social location and putting the rest of one's life in jeopardy in order to enjoy being at the wedding banquet. If you weren't prepared to take steps to show that being at that banquet meant everything to you, then you'd best not be there.”<sup>1</sup>

Sam Wells goes on to say that baptism is the definitive moment when Christians say, “I am allowing myself to be made different by the difference made by Christ.”

Diane had put on her baptismal robe, and she allowed herself to be made different by the difference made by Christ. She had been stretched in the circumstances of her life, and she'd been willing to hold tightly to God's love in that stretching. I saw that. We are all invited into this in our baptism. We are invited to let this show, in the world by letting our gentleness show as Paul put it to the Philippians. By letting our love show, and by being willing to be stretched as we hold onto this love at the same time as we hold the suffering, the contradictions, the inconsistencies on this life's journey.

May this morning's worship, this morning's time in community ground us in God's love. May we soak it in – hear it, sing it, taste it – so that we've got a firm grip on it when we leave this place. May we let it show for others to see and feel. May we

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-10/remade>

hold tightly to it as the challenges of this life stretch us, as we seek a way of love, in Jesus name. Amen.