



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 23A, OCTOBER 11, 2020
EXODUS 32:1-14; PSALM 106:1-6, 19-23; MATTHEW 22:1-14



COVER UP

This summer, Tent City 3 took up residence in the parking lot just outside the cathedral nave. Fifty beloved souls sought refuge here, longing for rest and nourishment and healing. Many of you offered them food, water, and clothing. All of us prayed for them, just as we pray each week for the whole human family.

One day, I witnessed something at the camp that will stay with me a long time. On a hot

July afternoon, a man walked up to the entrance of the camp. He carried a small backpack and wore a tattered pair of cut-off jeans and some old sneakers. None of the residents recognized him but that didn't matter. Gary, one of the camp leaders asked him what he needed. "Just a bottle of water and a little bit of food, if you have any to spare," The response from the camp was swift: "Sure, man. We've got lots." But there was a catch. Camp rules required anyone in

the camp to be fully clothed. Before the man could come in, he would need to put on a shirt. So Gary said to the man, “Just cover up, and we’ll get you what you need.”

What took place that day was a current day replay of today’s gospel. In this morning’s gospel, Jesus uses a wedding banquet to tell us something about the reign of heaven. He uses two parables to make a point about the realm of God. It is this second story, the parable of the wedding garment, that I want to focus on today.

It’s a frustrating and confusing story. Everyone receives an invitation to attend the event of the year. Lots of people show up. One of them looks different than everyone else. She’s the one the host notices. She’s the one who gets thrown out, because she is wearing the wrong thing. In the end the host comes off looking more like an insecure middle schooler, rather than the gracious host he thinks he is. What’s Jesus up to with this story? If this is a parable about the realm of God, I hope God isn’t as fickle as the host is about what we wear. God has bigger issues to deal with right now.

That’s the thing about parables. The point of the story rarely comes from the first few details we notice. What seems obvious at first is only the first layer to a multi-dimensional puzzle. So if you are wearing your PJ’s right

now, don’t worry. Jesus doesn’t care about that.

Instead, this parable turns on something else. The clue is tucked away between the host’s interrogation and his inhospitable response.

When the host confronts the guest, Jesus tells us that the guest is speechless. She does not ask where she can get a coat, nor does she say that she has given hers away to another guest. She does not ask if the meal is a meat-only affair, or if there are equally attractive vegan options. She doesn’t challenge the premise of the whole affair. She doesn’t even say thank you. The guest’s silence is deafening, and it is that silence moves the host to act.

Silence: it is an important spiritual practice. There are times when silence is absolutely necessary. Active listening, the kind needed to hear God, requires some amount of silence. Silence *is* an integral part of discernment. It helps separate out the noise of the world from the whispers of God. Elijah discovered God not in the roar of the whirlwind on Mt. Horeb but through the sheer sound of silence. The community of Saint Mark’s continues to practice another version of active listening. We are wrestling with the reality of systemic racism and our roles as enablers of that injustice. Part of that work includes listening, really listening, to people and perspectives that have been

historically silenced by the majority, including those of us in leadership positions and other positions of privilege. That kind of listening is spiritual work. That's the kind of silence Jesus encourages.

But there are also times when silence is not okay. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it so eloquently in his missive from a jail in Birmingham in 1963. "More and more," Dr. King wrote, "...people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."¹ Sometimes, silence is a proxy for indifference. We are still trying to figure out how to repent from the kind of indifference and silence Dr. King was talking about. That's what the guest discovers in the parable, too.

This guest teaches us an important lesson. Showing up is important! But showing up is only the first step. Like parables, what we experience on the surface is just the start of a multilayered experience. The radical acceptance of God comes with a radical responsibility on our part to respond. Saying yes to God through baptism is a start, but baptism is just the beginning. Everything we do in every aspect of our lives is a response to

God's gracious invitation. Our thoughts, words, and deeds, what we do and what we leave undone -- all of it matters.

Ultimately, this parable is about two things: God's dream for the world and how we respond. Jesus urges us to see the world as God imagines it -- as good and holy, where justice is about restoration rather than retribution. In God's world, the table is richly laden with an unending feast for all people throughout all time. In God's world, love is the only currency accepted. Love is the only motive that moves people to act. In God's world, love is the only thing that matters. Jesus dares us to dream this audacious dream with God. And then Jesus challenges us to make that dream a reality. That's why God put us on this earth.

So how did that dream unfold at Tent City 3? For a split second, it looked like the shirtless visitor was going to leave. He didn't have a shirt. Such a simple thing, this single piece of clothing, and yet, it was a barrier this man could not overcome. Gary noticed the man's hesitation. As he turned to leave, Gary yelled, "Wait! We have lots of shirts. Here's one. In fact, take a couple." Gary pulled out two new shirts and gave them to the man. Then, people came from all over the camp to welcome him. They took him to get more

¹Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16th, 1963, p 11. For an electronic copy of the letter, see:

http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf.

clothes and supplies. Finally, they sat him down and brought some water and food. The man looked stunned, and then relieved. “Thanks,” I heard him whisper. The realm of God unfolded right there in the parking lot of Saint Mark’s Cathedral. God’s generosity overflowed that afternoon. The response was overwhelming.

God is speaking to us once again. Earlier this week, someone spray painted more Cathedral property. The Black Lives Matter banner on

the lawn now includes a coda with the words “Prove it!” Is this vandalism? Maybe. The Cathedral’s facilities director chose to frame it another, more helpful way. On Thursday, David Wagner said that maybe this was a challenge. David’s right, I think. God knows we are up to that challenge. Now we just have to prove it to ourselves and to the rest of the world.

Let’s get to work. How will you respond?

Matthew 22:1-14: *[Once more Jesus spoke to the people 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.”]

Saint Mark’s Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You’ll find Saint Mark’s Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!