

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION
Exodus 32: 1-14; Matthew 22: 1-14
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost • October 15, 2023
by Pat Berger

Our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew for this morning is not one of your warmer and fuzzier Jesus stories. And if the main thing in our minds as we come to worship today is what is happening in Israel, this has not been one of our warmer and fuzzier weeks. We get a gentler version of the same story in the Gospel according to Luke, in chapter 14. The writers of these two Gospels had different audiences and different goals; today we get the toughness that is Matthew.

The writer of Matthew compared the Kingdom of heaven to a king giving a wedding banquet for his son. When we read just that much, we can think, oh, the Kingdom must be a wonderful place! A king would give a really nice banquet for his son, don't you think? Well, we have been to weddings and we've been in weddings, and weddings have their moments; this one was to be no different. The king sent out his slaves to bring the invited ones in -- and they wouldn't come. They were busy. The king tried again. "Tell them this," he said. "Tell them that dinner is ready, the oxen and the fatted calves have been slaughtered and prepared -- they must come!" Still they wouldn't come, and in fact some of them killed the slaves who had brought the invitation!

This made the king really angry, so he sent others of his slaves to kill the killers. Then, more slaves were sent out to gather in anyone they could find who would come, and finally the banquet room was filled. Finally: now they could eat! But: oh, no: one of the guests was not properly attired. Wait, wait, we want to say. He didn't begin the day thinking he would end up at a fancy wedding.

When we think of the wedding banquet as the Kingdom of God, though, (which is what Jesus has in mind in this parable), we can begin to understand some of what is happening here. Each of us, each of everyone, everyone, has been invited to this wedding, to be members

of God's Kingdom. What does that mean for each of all of us? We can't just show up. We need to prepare. How do we show that we are ready for this wedding? This has been the question for God's people since way before Jesus' time and ever since Jesus time.

We see it in our reading from the Book of the Exodus today. It is another familiar story for us: Moses had gone up the mountain to talk with God, and when he didn't come back right away, the people decided that he was just plain gone. They were in need of another god, then. Thinking as people do rather than as God does, the decision was made to make gods for themselves, gods of gold. They went to Aaron, and asked him to make for them gods; Aaron asked for their gold; they took off earrings and such and Aaron went to work, forming -- or (the Hebrew is unclear) engraving -- a god. God, the one God, was not happy -- at all -- and told Moses to get back to them immediately. Graven images were not going to get God's people anywhere, or get them anything. God had bad intentions for those "stiff-necked" people; of Moses, however, God would make, "a great nation."

Moses implored God, though, we are told. "You brought these people out of the land of Egypt; why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them, to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." And God changed the divine mind. At least one of God's people -- that would be Moses -- was properly attired for that wedding.

When we see the shreds that remain of some places in Israel after bombings in the past week, it is not difficult for us to imagine God's wrath burning hot against some people. And it is not hard for us to imagine the king noticing someone, many someones, not properly attired for the wedding banquet. And it is not hard for us to remember that it is not only the really, really horrid things that go against what we know about how we ought to act as the children of our God. Perhaps something comes to your mind that happened in your life this week

that you wish you had done differently, or that you wish someone else had done differently.

Like God's people through the years, it is essential for us to remember and commit ourselves to all that it means to be God's people, to wear the clothing of love and liberty and life. Karoline Lewis wrote, "It is not enough anymore to call yourself a follower of Christ and then act as if you were sound asleep during the Sermon on the Mount." Each of us has opportunities each day to show our "Christ clothing" -- sometimes at home, sometimes in the neighborhood or at the grocery store or in places where we volunteer our time and energies. Members of Plymouth donate their time and energies and dollars and coins to many local causes -- you make a difference! And you donate time and energy and dollars and coins to this church -- you make a difference! And, because of who you are, you do other things that make a difference for the Kingdom -- well-timed phone calls, notes, smiles for people who look as if they might not have been smiled at all day.

Some of the money that we give to special offerings, like One Great Hour of Sharing, goes to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. When you look that up on your computer, you will find that PDA is already at work in Israel, helping mission co-workers already there providing humanitarian assistance, and a grant has been approved to assist a hospital in Gaza. Other recent PDA involvements include help for those impacted by the earthquake in Afghanistan, by floods in Libya, and by Hurricane Idalia in Cuba, Mexico and this country. Your dollars, your wedding clothes, are doing good work for the Kingdom! This month we are gathering the Peace and Global Witness Offering, which focusses on global reconciliation -- we could use some of that.

"Many are called, but few are chosen," we read in Matthew; we have been called and we have been chosen. Let us accept that invitation! That means something different for each of us, and it means that each of us has something to do and to be -- something to wear. Karoline Lewis finished her commentary with this: "What not to wear? Complacency, conformity, and any kind of garb that is content with

the way things are. What should we wear, so that the whole of the world can see who we are and what we are about? The kind of compassion, birthed by God's own righteousness, that cannot, anymore, leave things the way they are."

Let us pray.