

Sunday, October 9, 2011
Lectionary 28
Proper 23
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

I.N.I.

Come, you that are blessed by God. Come to the banquet.

Can heaven be like a wedding? Kari and I had a great wedding day on January 3, 1987. All our close friends and family were all in one place at one time. Bill Beermann, a former student at Yale's Institute of Sacred Music and musician here prelude music by Messiaen (from *La Nativite du Seigneur*, the Nativity of our Lord). David Ludwig and Cheryl Dieter sang "Et Misericordia," from Bach's *Magnificat*. Our parents each walked with us in procession ("Love Divine, all Loves Excelling). Our mutual mentor from Valparaiso University, Fred Niedner, preached a sermon about all the tables at which we would serve in our lives. Kari and I each served wine and my best friend from high school and his wife helped us bake the Eucharistic bread. The reception at Strongbow Inn had dancing and toasts, the turkey was moist and so was the cake, and Kari and I were so happy. If heaven is anything like that, then I think it will be a good thing.

If tasting bread and wine in our weekly eucharist is as we sometimes to say "a foretaste of the feast to come," and is like most wonderful weddings, and the bread is warm and wholesome, and the wine has a fruity nose and clean finish, then I say "bring it on!" "I want me some of that!"

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But what if you don't come? Why wouldn't you come? What if you don't want to come? Why wouldn't you not want to come? Do we not say *come as you are, all are welcome*? Do we also not want to cast as wide a swath as we can to those beyond our community, beyond our "members," beyond who we expect to show up, and say, "hey you can come, too?" "Hey, this feast is for all who hunger and thirst for God, who yearn to be connected and fed, to know joy when all around stinks and it seems that there is just a dim bulb instead of a shining promised future?"

There's a problem in our world that may be like the problem in the kingdom story Jesus tells. There are people who just would rather go about their business than join the party, the wedding party, **the party of a lifetime** as I tell couples that I counsel. And so we must continuously creatively invite, seeking any who wonder if there is a place for them. And any barriers that inhibit this party spirit, this connection to the kingdom broken open, have to be contended with. We can't assume everyone knows that God's love knows no bounds. We can't assume that we know, really, that God's love knows no bounds.

But I know that it does. I believe that it does. And at least once in awhile, I find myself on the receiving end of that boundary-breaking activity.

On my first sabbatical ever, in 2006, Kari and I spent five weeks in Israel/Palestine, in an ecumenical clergy study program at that Tantur Institute. Our deepest memories, however, relate to our reconnecting with the Azar family who themselves spent sabbatical time the previous year in New Hampshire. Barhoum Azar is pastor at the Arabic-speaking congregation, the Church of the Redeemer, in the Old City, and is Palestinian. When Barhoum and his wife Nahla and their three daughters Juji, Sally, and Samawere with us in 2005, Kari and I marveled at how well our children got along with theirs. Nahla said, “well, they are pastor’s kids, aren’t they?”

The next year, when we were in the program at Tantur, we had weekends to ourselves. Nahla asked us, pleaded with us to go to Jordan to visit her mother and pray with her. We weren’t really sure what we are getting into, but said, “Sure! How do we do that?”

So now after that trip from Israel to Jordan and back we have stories, among them about border crossings that include Israeli soldiers inspecting the bus with huge mirrors shoved underneath, and an interminable wait to re-enter Israel while sitting next to none other than Anderson Cooper, himself being made to wait.

But it was Abu Issam, our cab driver, who offered the ministrations to us. Abu Issam, with deep wrinkles in his weathered face, whose four sons all drive taxis, whose Muslim commitment makes him avoid offering rides for a few hours on Fridays, drove us two hours or so to the border crossing. As you discover quickly when you travel around those parts, you can go from urban and cosmopolitan surroundings to desolate country within minutes. After forty-five minutes, Abu Issam pulls over to the side of the road, and says “wait here.” He walks across the street, goes into a rather nondescript roadside shanty shop, only emerging minutes later with gifts to share, meat and cheese sandwiches, cucumbers, juice, and fruit. “Here, for you,” our ragtag taxi driver said, beaming and nodding to us. And for Kari and for me, it was as if a feast was laid out for us, not realizing that we would be invited to any kind of banquet, let alone by our cabbie. With Abu Issam and the two of us munching away, it was the kind of communion where God’s love reached across barriers of class, culture, and religion, and where Kari and I might as well have been back at Strongbow’s with that luscious turkey and moist cake.

So in addition to the ones we think would naturally be feasting with us, God goes beyond to share freely the kingdom’s bounty, breaking down barriers and stratifications and creating a wholly new, a newly holy community.

And while the one who didn’t dress for the occasion was cast out into the outer darkness, we have to know that that isn’t the end of the story. We also hear about Jesus releasing an unkempt man chained by demons. We hear Jesus tell us the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to look for one lost and rejoicing more over the one found. We hear Jesus using children

as examples of the greatness of the kingdom. And in the end, we find Jesus, stripped of his clothes and dignity, facing the outer darkness of abandonment with nails through his body and in between two taunting criminals.

Jesus, on behalf of God's boundary-breaking mission, goes to places where things are grim and dark, and there provides viaticum, bread for the journey, life-saving bread.

We stand within grief while dear companions have died in the past weeks, Dick Benson, and Ruth Jacobson. We remember that one year ago tomorrow dear, sweet Ivar Henrickson was killed instantly driving home from church. There are days, and maybe you know them, too, when you just don't know how you got to this point, but things seem dark and lonely.

So when I hear Isaiah's poem from chapter 25 about the feast *of the finest foods, a feast with vintage wines, a feast of seven course, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts* [from *The Message*], I cup my hands to my ears. I set up an imaginary amplification through loudspeakers to blare the sense from the prophet shared that **God overturns our deepest losses and easily gobbles up any threats to our safety and existence.**

I look to gatherings around food and drink, like Good Meals that Bethesda's Youth provides, like sandwiches made to honor 25 years in ministry, like soups for men at the Shelter, like last night's fun Cabaret, and I want to know that in these we are participating in extending hospitality and love across boundaries like Abu Issam did, like the most wonderful wedding ever, like the weekly ritual gathering that says the kingdom of heaven here tastes so good, invites all to know the extent of God's love in Jesus, and in the midst of life and love, and at times of loss, and while we feel hopeless and in the dark, in our ritual gatherings and human encounters feasts are revealed, hospitality is extended, and in small and great ways God creates a wholly new, and a newly holy community.

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