

SPG#185, Pentecost 22A, Proper 23

October 12, 2008

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Years ago, during the 1980's in Atlanta, Georgia, I worked as a technician on a psychiatric unit on the 11-7 3rd shift. In those days we drew a variety of psychiatric patients including troubled adolescents, alcoholics, people diagnosed with schizophrenia, and older folk with some type of dementia. For those of us on the night shift, it fell to us to take vital signs, to help nurses as they gave medication, and to watch these patients through the night. For many of them were capable of harming themselves or someone else. Many times we were called on to restrain someone while an injection was given.

Many times we had to bathe new admissions who were covered in feces after taking LSD. I recall one night in particular when I was in the back of the unit watching all of our patients in the back, including a new alcoholic admission. As I sat there around 3 AM, I heard an older woman as she cried out over and over again, "Oh Lord. Oh Lord."

At the same time our new alcoholic admission could not sleep and was up pacing in his room. I think he must have had metal taps on his shoes. For as his shoes hit the floor as he walked there was a constant "click click" sound. Finally one of our other people moaned over and over again "Uh, uh," in a fitful sleep. And so the litany ran like this, "Oh Lord, oh Lord, click click, uh, uh." At about 4:30 I was ready for some medication myself. For our young people I will say that in giving basic care to people like that, you learn something about people and about yourself that you do not learn in books.

In those years one of the things we did all of the time was to take vital signs. Everyone regularly had their pulse, their respirations, and their blood pressure checked.

It is possible, I think, to take the vital signs of one's faith as well. And it probably is a good thing to be asking yourself from time to time, "How am I doing in my faith? How is it going?" And even if you do not ask, then in your life in the church those questions will come up in the liturgy and for sure in the scripture. Today's gospel is one such scripture. This is the story of the King's Wedding Feast. It is told by Jesus, and he says the story is symbolic of the kingdom of heaven. The king invites many people to a great wedding feast at his palace in honor of his son. He sends out his slaves to give the invitations. But those who are invited make light of the invitation and indicate that they have better things to do, like tending to a farm or a business. Others invited mistreated the slaves and even killed some of them. The king was beside himself with rage. He sent his troops, killed the murderers, and burned their city. And then he had his slaves go and invite all who would come to the feast, good and bad. When the banquet hall was filled he found one guest who was not properly clothed with a wedding garment, and he had him forcibly removed, and it says he was cast **"into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** The gospel ends with Jesus saying, **For many are called, but few are chosen.**

Parables like this one fly in the face of comfortable and routinized religion. And there are more than one or two passages in the New Testament, like this one, that are meant to get our attention, meant to challenge our comfort, meant to challenge us toward a more radical spirituality. Walter Brueggemann in his book The Prophetic Imagination says that all religions are destined to become acculturated. In other words they are destined to become more amenable and more like the culture around them.

And thus he says there will from time to time be a need for prophets to call us out of routine, out of complacency, out of sameness into a radical faith that meets the demands of new times.

Our world is less and less routine. Climate change with the increasing possibility and probability of violent storms appears here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. War continues. The threat of terrorism continues. Economic downturn and instability continues and may be increasing. We are in the midst of a Presidential election. And I see and hear the candidates talking about one thing at a time. This is how I will handle terrorism. This how I will handle war. This is how I will handle economic instability.

But the fact of continuing climate change is something I am not hearing discussed at length. And the fact that we live in a new world where we face all these challenges simultaneously is not being discussed.

In these days I think some Christians are advantaged and disadvantaged at the same time. Advantaged because we are assured in our hearts, in our worship together of the love of God. We are assured, and we can feel the presence of God in our lives. But, at the same time, if situations on many fronts get worse, some of us may say it is the end of the world. The end of the world is depicted in the Bible. And I just happen to live in the time when it came to pass. And so, with that line of thinking, little can be done. And perhaps there is resignation and a massive sense of helplessness. But the consistent call in scripture is to love God and each other. There is no call to give up. We are always invited to the feast. And it is no routine thing. Today our call to be with God and with each other comes on the cusp of a new world emerging. That new world, taken in its totality, will require a new faith that transcends routine and business as usual.

We need to, with a new sense of courage, raise our faces to see this new world with its realities of terrorism, war, climate change, and economic downturn. And we must with hope live our lives in awareness of this new world. And while we are stretching our hearts and minds to appreciate and comprehend this world, we will provide for our families, work our jobs, and care for those who are needy and vulnerable.

In these days we need the love of God as never before. In these days we need each other as never before. And we should always be tending to those assurances. And we should always be reminding each other of friendship. And it is OK to say things like, "I am so glad I am in this church with you." Or "I am so glad that God has called me to live my life with you in it." For I am convinced that each person here, young and old, is a gift to the rest of us. And I am convinced that each person here, young and old, has a message or messages written in your life that is important for all of us to hear. With that in mind, I want to know, What is on your heart and in your mind about these days?

We will do better living in this new world if we face and celebrate what is new within.

And while I am aware of a new world, I am also aware of a new light and a new sound that are emerging in all of us that have to do with living triumphantly in these days. And I think I can see the light on your faces. And I think I can hear the sound in your voices.

But I will need for you to confirm that and to clarify. And so, for my part in being faithful to loving and living in a new day, I will say that I do love God. And I do love you. Amen.