

The Invitation to the Table of Grace

Matthew 22:1-14; Psalm 23

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In our ongoing series, the Enemies of Gratitude, we see two contrasting readings here between Psalm 23 and Matthew's parable of the Wedding Feast. In David's psalm we hear his clear and repetitive acclamation to God's provision for him. If you look closely at this psalm, you will notice that there is nothing that David claims to be from his own abilities or that he is owed such care and provision by God. Yet he ends the psalm vowing to spend his days in the House of God worshipping, expressing gratitude for God's provision.

Contrast that to the parable of the Great Banquet. This parable also appears in Luke's Gospel. But in this version the stakes are much higher. It is not just a party given by a member of the community. It is a wedding banquet given by a king. The first guests don't just make excuses for their refusal to attend, they brutalize the messengers as well, echoing the abuses found in the parable of the evil vineyard tenants just a few verses earlier.

The key verse found in the parable is the King's decision to take all and any who are able to attend. "Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests." We see this scenario repeated in the Gospels. The message of God's salvation is received by the those that others deem unworthy, while the educated and most religious fail to recognize the Messiah they claim to be seeking.

Now the new guests come and are given wedding garments to wear for this special occasion. What they were lacking the king provided. This too is accepted by all except

one who fails to receive the generosity of the king and thinks he can be there on his own merits.

When we are filled with a sense of privilege or entitlement, we fail to see the gifts of God's provision offered to us. We fail to acknowledge that we are there because of God's kindness. We also fail to acknowledge a duty to come when invited by the king. This parable is the last in a series of three parables that Jesus tells the religious authorities who are questioning his authority and rumors refusing to affirm the rumors that Jesus may be the messiah they proclaim will come someday. If you go back to Chapter 21 you can find the other two parables. In these other parables, Jesus accuses the religious authorities of disobedience of God's command and abusing their responsibilities to watch over the people and give tribute to God. They fail to bring the fruits of salvation and claim it for themselves in a greedy hostile takeover of God's Vineyard instead.

These three parables together show the progression and danger of entitlement can have on people. For the Pharisees and other leaders, these parables pointed to their disobedience, their selfish self-indulgence at the expense of the people and their own arrogance to think that they were not accountable to God for their actions.

If we live with a mindset of entitlement, that God owes us we fail to see the interconnectedness of our lives together. It is a message found throughout the Gospel that our salvation and our place at God's table is an invitation of Grace, not privilege or entitlement. God does not owe us anything; Salvation is a gift.

I am reading that same message in the book Braiding Sweetgrass many of us are reading. In it the Robin wall Kimmerer writes about the duty of humans to give back and care for the land, water, and all living creatures and to treat them all as sacred gifts.

Listen to this quote from Chapter four:

What is the duty of humans? If gifts and responsibilities are one, then asking what is our responsibility is the same as asking what is our gift? It is said that

only humans have the capacity for gratitude. That is among our gifts. It's such a simple thing but we all know the power of gratitude is to incite a cycle of reciprocity. If my girls run out the door with lunch in hand, without a "thanks Mama", I confess I get to feeling a tad miserly with my time and energy. But when I get a hug of appreciation, I want to stay up late to bake cookies for tomorrow's lunch bag. We know that appreciation begets abundance. Why should it not be so for mother earth who packs us a lunch every single day.

Throughout the book Kimmerer drives home the importance of expressing gratitude to all living things because we live in a cycle of reciprocity and interconnectedness. We have an obligation to give something in return and hold in sacred trust our responsibility to share the resources we have at our disposal in nature.

Kimmerer even lays out principles regarding foraging for food and resources with such rules as don't take the first plant you find, seek permission from the plant to take, offer a gift in return along with prayers of gratitude, only take what you need and never take more than fifty percent of what is found.

This rules of reciprocity bring with them an awareness that we are in community with nature and with one another. When we realize the truth that we do not own any of this, it is all a gift then we begin to receive the gift of God's abundant graces that gives all of creation life sustaining gifts to be shared by all.

Looking back over the history of the world, especially during the rise of empires, we know that the religion and government became complicit in justifying the imperialism, barbarism and pillaging of other lands for personal gain. The Doctrine of Discovery and other such teachings by the religious leaders in the fifteenth century gave legal and religious justification for many European countries to expand their empires around the world. These countries with the backing of their religious authorities sought to dominate and subjugate other countries around the world. Violent compulsory conversion of native peoples or the enslavement of people deemed savages was sanctioned by the church and fulfilled by armies of conquest with priests following close behind. The

collective desire to dominate and strip the land of precious resources fueled attempts to enslave or kill others especially the people of African or Native American descent. Dehumanizing them to justify the abuses. These abuses grew to an ideology that justified additional beliefs that created White nationalism, Christian and white supremacy and Christian Nationalism.

Today, some five hundred years later and we are just now beginning to acknowledge the atrocities of Christopher Columbus. Just this past year the Vatican publicly repudiated the false teachings of the Doctrine of Discovery. The US and Canadian governments are now beginning to acknowledge the abuses of government and church in the establishment of boarding schools that stripped Native Americans of their culture, religion, language and future children in the name of Christianity. Other European countries and Australia are also wrestling with these same matters.

It is a difficult and painful history to admit that our ancestors weaponized the Gospel to justify the atrocities of empire builders fueled by greed, domination and hatred of our fellow human. This is not something that will change in an instant or even in one generation, but I pray that all Christians will work to dismantle and unlearn the false teachings of the doctrine of Discovery and other beliefs that made these atrocities possible. Through the centuries Christ continues to call us to repentance, to loving our neighbor as ourselves and most of all Loving God with our whole minds, bodies and spirits. May we, like David worship God acknowledging that all that we have and all that we are comes from the Lord our Shepherd and we shall not want. God sets a table before us and invites us and our enemies to come to the feast of Grace. The question is – will we lay down our weapons, our agendas and sit at the table of grace, even with our perceived enemies?

Let us graciously accept the invitation to come to the banquet of grace and see the bounty of God's Goodness given to all.