

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Well, if the economic news of the past week wasn't enough to give us all the anxiety we need, we have today's readings to ponder. In our lesson from Exodus we have the Israelites angering God by asking Aaron to create an idol for them. Aaron smelted down their gold rings and cast a golden calf and presented it to them for worship: "" Our lesson tells us that the wrath of God burned hot against them.

I have some compassion for the people. Here they are alone in the middle of the wilderness with no idea of where they are going. Moses, the man who had led them out of Egypt, has ascended Mount Sinai to converse with God. However he has been gone for a long time. Lost and leaderless, they must have been anxious and worried. So what did they do? They did the only thing that knew – what they saw the Egyptians doing! In line with middle eastern religions of those times, they were not eating, drinking and partying for the sake of having a good time. They were partying in front of the idol to get the God in a good mood and thus coax the favors they need from the God.

God is angered to the point of wanting to destroy them all and start over again by building a new nation from the descendents of Moses. Moses argues with God in ways that remind us of Abraham's bargaining with God. Moses even tells God that God will lose face if people think he took the Israelites out of Egypt only to destroy them. Like Abraham before him, Moses gets God to relent and change God's mind. When you see the dialogue, it is intimate, close and personal. It is a real honest conversation.

When I compare God's relationship with Moses to the Israelites' behavior, it seems that God is angered by God's own sense of frustration more than by what the people are doing. God wants to use the people as instruments in his continuing creation and that requires a relationship. The Israelites, however, are doing what we do far too often; they are not seeking a relationship but, instead, are trying to trick or jolly up God to give them what they think they need to alleviate their anxiety.

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew, we again find an angry and wrathful God who throws a wedding guest out from the banquet into the outer darkness for not wearing a wedding robe. What is going on here? I think it helps to see that Matthew is taking a simple story from the Gospel of Thomas (written about 60AD) that had been elaborated on and changed by Luke in his Gospel written about 80AD and further embellishes and changes it in his Gospel written about 90AD. Matthew tells

the story in a way that brings to mind end-times. This is the heavenly banquet and the theme is judgment – who is worthy to enjoy it.

Those initially invited to the banquet by the king either made light of its importance and valued their own pursuits more highly or they abused and killed the king's slaves who carried the invitation to them. The king is enraged and sends his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city. This may be a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70AD.

The king passes a judgment of unworthiness on those initially invited and excludes them. He tells his slaves to go into the streets and invite in all you find to the wedding banquet. The hall was then filled with guests, both good and bad. However, the king spots some poor soul without a wedding garment and casts him out to Matthew's favorite place – “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

What does this mean and how can it be like the Kingdom of Heaven? I think we have to remember that we are doing bible talk here and also remember that Jesus was speaking with 1st Century Jews while he was teaching in the temple atop Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It would convey to those Jews listening in the Temple the promise in Isaiah of a great victory feast where God has vanquished the ruthless nations and restored the oppressed Israelites to glory. This is what the Temple authorities expected. It is what a lot of people expected of a Messiah, but God had other plans

and Matthew is retelling the parable in a way that points to the future in light of what his community experienced.

What Matthew is reminding us is that the honor is not found in the guests who have been invited, but in the invitation and the one who is doing the inviting. Those initially invited valued themselves and their own interests above the invitation from the King. Indeed, some killed those who the king sent to remind them of the invitation. The King reclaims his right to be the one to confer honor by inviting all to come into the banquet hall. I think the guest without the wedding garment is a reminder us all that, worthy or not, we have all been honored with an invitation and a place at the table. The only thing that gets us thrown out is our failing to recognize the honor that has been bestowed on us by some outward manifestation in our lives.

I think read this way, the parable as told by Matthew both celebrates God's enormous generosity towards all of us and all of Creation and at the same time warns us not to feel that we are in any way deserving or owed the honor God bestows upon us.

Both of our lessons are told by peoples who faced tough times and great anxiety. It is easy to focus on our fears, needs and losses and we are tempted to create a God who can somehow give us what we think we need. When we focus our worthiness in ourselves and what we have, then, like those who declined the King's invitation, we dishonor God by treating our Creator as an employee. Matthew

reminds us of God's enormous generosity and that this requires a response. The wedding garment can be rather simple – as simple as an awareness of the honor bestowed on us and a willingness to live with an attitude of gratitude and thanksgiving. That is enough to move us into relationship with God and into a Kingdom that arrives not by war and conquest but by an enlightened consciousness and open and thankful hearts.

All it takes is to knowingly and thankfully accept the invitation. That is easy enough; the hard part is to get our fear and ourselves out of the way.

Amen.