



## Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday of Pentecost, Oct. 15, 2023 Celebrating the Feast of St. Luke

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Exodus 32:1-14

Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14 *and* Luke 14:16-24

Luke 4:18-19

Good morning, and God's blessings. Welcome to this spiritual home base for us all, here at St. Luke's in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Faithful followers of Christ Jesus have gathered here in this building for 131 years, and there has been a community of fellowship for over 140 years. We are part of something much greater, much more enduring, than ourselves. We are a small part of the ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit in this world. Welcome to St. Luke's.

We come together today to celebrate and remember St. Luke, the ancient Greek-Jewish physician and disciple who worked with Paul in bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles and who is named as author of two of the most beloved books in the Bible: the Gospel according to Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles. And we celebrate the life of this congregation here, as we seek to embody kind of Christian life that we see in Luke's record of the life of Jesus and the life of the early church through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But we gather today deeply troubled and worried by the horrifying violence and unrest around the world, now erupting between Israel and Palestine. Hamas has launched a brutal attack of terror on Israel, with no regard for whom they kill. Israel has mounted a massive counter-attack that has little regard for civilian casualties, and has shut off supplies of water, food, and aid to Gaza.

The bitterness and animosity between Palestinian and Israeli people run deep.

It is a dangerous game that Israel is embarking on. I cannot help but think about the biblical passages from the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, where we get the phrase, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." In the book of Leviticus, it says, "The one who injures his countryman – as he has done, so it shall be done to him: [specifically,] fracture in place of fracture, eye in place of eye, tooth in place of tooth. Just as another person has received injury from him, so it will be given to him." This principle was put in place to restrict people's impulse to seek mounting retribution, where the payback was worse than the original violence. Over the years, violence erupting from Palestine has been met with a force from Israel that takes more life than was lost and exacts more damage than was done.

The suffering in Israel has been incredible at the hands of Hamas terrorist fighters. The suffering in Gaza has been ongoing and is now very intense in the face of the response of Israel. We hold them all before God, praying for healing, guidance, a rapid end of war, and peace.

Today, our first scripture returned us to the journey of the ancient Hebrew people through the wilderness. Moses has been up on the mountain in God's presence again, for a long, long time. We hear today from 12 chapters later in the book of Exodus, after last week when we heard (as children are learning today) about the ten commandments which are the core summary for several chapters that are the covenant of ways to live, laid out for the Hebrew people. All of what God desires for God's people is to live within the boundaries of lovingkindness and respect – as Kay Lockhart so

beautifully outlined for us last week, and as our children are learning today, the ten commandments are laid out for us as “ten best ways to live.” And they are summed up in the Torah and by Jesus under two great headings: Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

After the Hebrew people readily agree to follow this great covenant, Moses heads up the mountain again, and is gone for days and weeks. The people begin to get itchy. What is taking Moses so long? But what happens is heart-wrenching. While God is planning with Moses the beautiful intricacies of the tabernacle where God is going to come and dwell directly with his people, the people are drifting away already from their allegiance to the God who has saved them, fed them, and given them water in the desert. They are drifting into the lures of anxiety, uncertainty, impatience, lostness, and desperation – and in that state of mind and heart they look for security and make a false god for themselves. While God is planning the bridal chamber for his dwelling with his beloved people, these same people are turning their backs on God and being completely unfaithful in their relationship with God, making an image of a god that is more similar to the gods of the empires of Egypt and Assyria.

Note how God, who had an impulse of incredible anger against the Hebrew people, changed his mind – because Moses stepped into the gap! Moses pleaded with God for his people. Moses acted out of faithfulness to the love that he had learned for his people.

How far will Hamas continue to go in its disregard for human life? How far will Israel go in retaliation? The people of these lands are far beyond a more controlled “eye for eye” kind of justice now. And this could just as easily happen here as it is happening there and has happened around the world time after time after time. We are creatures with potential for cruelty arising from primal impulses that only come under restraint with the regulating and transforming power of love. Love that is born of gratitude and sustained through faithfulness.

This church continues as a witness to God’s overflowing love because of the spirit of gratitude and faithfulness that has undergirded people’s giving of their wealth and resources. People have contributed money and property, countless hours of time, their energies and talents, so that St. Luke’s can continue to shine with the light of Christ Jesus and be that wonderful presence of yeast in the dough of this city and this region of North Idaho. We are not melting down our gold and silver to make a golden calf. We are – at least, we pray that we are – giving of our money and hours and energies for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and creating a space and community where we practice living as Jesus has called us to live in loving care for one another and the world around us.

How, then, will this look? How will we live in this world as followers of Christ the Light, Christ Jesus the Healer?

There was a reason that our church founders here in this place chose the name of St. Luke. There was something that spoke to them from the heart of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, for their time and place. And there are ways that the writings and witness of St. Luke to Christ the Healer and the Gatherer of all nations speaks to us today, for such a time as this in this place.

Let's take a closer look at how Luke stands out in scripture – comparing today's reading of the parable of the wedding feast from Matthew to the parallel parable of the great banquet in Luke – what's different?

Please open your Bibles (in your pews or at home) to Luke, chapter 14, verses 15-24. You have the Matthew text in your bulletin, and we heard it together. I want us to read through the Luke parable as a direct parallel to what we heard from Matthew. These are basically the same core parable, but with some really important differences. It is possible that the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were recalling this parable that Jesus may have told at different times and in different settings, for different audiences. It is also possible that the writers wrote and recalled this parable in direct relation to the current realities and challenges that were being experienced in the early Christian communities for whom they were writing.

So, the similarities here are an amazingly generous feast laid out in celebration, a group of first-round invited guests who all refuse the invitation, a stirring of anger in the host, and a sending of servants out to open the invitation widely to anyone who will come. The core of the parable is the generosity of the feast of the Kingdom of God.

But there are important differences. Note how the king (the host in Matthew) acts – he is enraged at the way his first invited guests mistreat and even murder his servants, and so he sends an army to kill them and to burn their cities to the ground; and then he casts one of his generously invited guests out because he was not wearing the wedding attire expected. I'm not sure Jesus' parable in Matthew is meant to show us the king as a symbolic character for God! This sounds like the kind of retribution that Hebrew law in scripture was seeking to prevent and prohibit.

Now, there are other times when Jesus tells a parable or offers a teaching with an extreme example of an otherwise negative person doing the right thing. "How many of you, when your child asks for bread, will give the child a stone?" And, there is the unjust judge who gets up to help the widow banging at his gate, not because he is moved to help but because he wants to quiet her down and get back to sleep. In each of these, Jesus points through and beyond human sinful motivations toward the God who will provide and do so much more: "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask" (Matt. 7:11).

Luke's recollection of the parable is very different. Look at the verses in your bible. The host is angered at those who refuse his invitation, but he does not seek retribution. He immediately turns to opening wide his feast to people in the wider public – like in Matthew, but going even further to name specifically the poor, the wounded, the lame, and the blind as those that the servant is to invite directly. Then, we have another round of invitations and seeking of people to come, because there is still room – something missing in Matthew. "Go out to the highways and hedges" – search even wider than you did before, beyond the city, out into the countryside and wild places! And there is not unfortunate guest who is cast out for having the wrong garments.

Luke's parable matches to tone, through and through, of Luke's Gospel and of the book of Acts. The message of Luke is, this Kingdom of God that Jesus is announcing and launching is for everyone far and wide, with especially wide invitation to those who are the lowest and the least in the societies of the world.

Now, I don't mean to say that one Gospel is better than the others. Well, I think I can admit that Luke's Gospel is my favorite. But each Gospel gives us a window into Jesus Christ, into God's movement in the world, and into God's desire for redeeming our broken humanity. Each Gospel's perspective comes to us today as a result of how the writers wrote and recorded what they remembered of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and who the writers were writing for.

Matthew was writing for Jewish followers of Jesus and some Gentile followers who joined them in community, at a time when there was terrible early persecution of Christ-followers by zealous (perhaps fundamentalist) Jews and by Roman rulers – and at a time when Jews were falling under heavy persecution and threat of annihilation by the Romans who destroyed the temple, broke the back of their rebellion, and killed all the fighters at Masada. In such a bloody, anger-fueled, hostile time, it is no surprise that these followers of Jesus looked to God for an angry justice to come down on their oppressors. One might even catch glimpses in Matthew's parable of the wedding feast the suffering of Jesus who was silent before his accusers at his trial, who entered the world of religion and empire of his Age but did not conform to all its rules and expectations that masked its injustices, who then goes out into the world of darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?

In any case, in contrast, Luke was writing for people across the Roman Empire who were discovering and learning about Jesus. Luke traveled with Paul in his mission for Christ Jesus around the Mediterranean, and was himself a Greek-educated Jewish physician, a world citizen of his age with a deep concern for people in need. He is the one who records the Early Church's expanding growth as its message of God's grace and life-changing love reached Gentiles from Ethiopia to cities in Greece and modern Italy and Turkey. Even through suffering and persecution, he saw the igniting warmth of Christ's love through the Holy Spirit continue to spread, reaching across social classes and changing human relationships. And he saw the power of God lifting up the lowly and bringing release to captives and new sight to the blind.

The core of who Jesus is, who the Holy Spirit is, and who the church is – these are all captured in the writings of Luke in the Gospel and in Acts in a way that shapes the hearts and minds of Christians. This is the God who cares for all who are downtrodden and in need, who lovingly embraces all people of any race, class, nation, role, or ability.

For us who are part of St. Luke's Episcopal Church here in Coeur d'Alene, here in this part of the Inland Northwest in North Idaho, this is the heart of our mission. We share, we proclaim, we celebrate, and we seek to embody the overflowing, boundless love of Jesus. This Kingdom of God is for all people, and with God's tender and vigorous embrace especially for those who are the weak, the poor, the small, the oppressed, the outsiders, the blind, the disabled, the diseased, and those in bondage. (And, by the way, the Gospel of Matthew gets this across clearly as well – the whole of Jesus' ministry is framed by the Beatitudes ["Blessed are the poor in spirit," "Blessed are those who mourn"] at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and the parable of the judgment of the nations at the end of his public teaching ["I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink"]).

This is our mission as a church community. This is what we are devoted to, here in this place and in all the ways we engage in the life of our various cities, towns, and this whole region. And I pray that it will ever remain at the heart of who we are as followers of the living Christ who seeks to bring healing, wholeness, and regathering of all people. Amen, friends. May it be so.