



## Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

**Exodus 32:1-14**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

**[Matthew 22:1-14](#)**

Friends, welcome to Fall! We enter this season with the joys of harvest and the coming of winter, both in mind. Even as we continue through this year that has been like no other we have known, let us take to heart Paul's words to the Christians in Philippi – Rejoice in the Lord always – in everything by prayer let God know your wishes – and think on all those things that are true, honorable, pure, pleasing, commendable. Let us, wherever we are, lift up our hearts and open ourselves to God's peace, love, and strength.

I want to explore with you today these scriptures from Exodus and Matthew. They are challenging, they can leave us with an unpleasant set of images of God as angry, vengeful, temperamental. And they carry a not pretty picture of ourselves.

Sometimes it takes a wider perspective for us to glimpse and grasp more fully the scriptures

First, let's spend some time with Exodus. Here we are continuing our journey with the Hebrew people, God's beloved chosen people – on the journey of rescue, redemption, onward to new life in a new land of promise – God providing all along the way, and, people whining all along the way.

Years ago when I read the story of the golden calf, I wondered why God was so extremely hurt and angered by the people's wayward behavior.

Then it hit me. God has been inviting these people into an intimate relationship and bond. In other later scriptures, we hear the prophets describe how the relationship between God and the people of Israel is like the loving bond between a husband and wife. Two lovers, giving themselves to each other, and committing themselves to each other.

And that's what is happening before this scene we read today, in Exodus. God has been busy laying out plans for a bond of relationship, like a marriage, with God's people. In the texts running up to this point, God is speaking to Moses about the promises to each other, and the ways to live – the "Ten Best Ways." Moses is presenting this and other laws that follow from the core ten commandments to the people, as their covenant with God. And next, God is speaking with Moses about plans for the tabernacle, where God will dwell among God's people. If you read this, it is very detailed planning of what the dwelling will be like, and the ways it will be arrayed and decorated. Listen just to these few details from God's wishes for the place of God's dwelling. *"You shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skilfully worked into them."* *"The altar of acacia wood... overlay it with bronze."* *"Twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and*

*their bands shall be of silver.” “You shall make a mercy-seat of pure gold.”* It hit me – God was making plans for the wedding chamber with God’s people, the home they would share, the space God envisioned to have.

This is how invested God was in relationship with God’s people. Think about it. How do we make plans when we are in love, of how life will be together and what kind of home we will build together?

So, think then about how incredibly wounding it was to God in this relationship when, as Moses is in close conversation with God on their behalf, they got bored and lost their sense of passion and devotion, and looked elsewhere for their relationship. How many of us have experienced, or even inflicted, wounds of wandering from our marriages and our primary relationships? Basically, during their betrothal, the people of God cheated on their relationship with God. And they did so by creating a new lover. How hurt are we when someone we love wanders away for someone else, cheats on us, rejects us?

God knows this pain.

Unfaithfulness exacts a heavy price in relationships. It tears at the trust and warmth and vulnerability of care between those who have pledged their love to each other.

The people have so quickly forgotten their promises, their vows to the God they said they would adore. While God is planning for their union, the people look for a fling with another God – one of their own making.

What are the distracting, alluring gods to which we give ourselves? Is it the almighty dollar, the bull of Wall Street? Is it the thrill of winning? Is it strength? Is it the nation, the flag? Is it an ideology? Is it a political idol? What has captured our love, our allegiance, our fantasies of giving us a better life and fulfilling our wishes?

I know that for me, at some points throughout my life, I have made a god of comfort, preferring and adoring ease rather than following some of the risks that the God of Life has laid out before me.

Yesterday, we found that someone during the night had spray-painted “Trump 2020” on the retaining wall of one of the properties of St. John’s Cathedral. It doesn’t matter whether it was Trump or Biden. What matters is that someone chose to mark space dedicated to God with another god, the political god of the moment for some.

Our little gods of allure and distraction become so important to us that they take over our good senses, and we step more and more across boundaries and lose respect for others because of our oversized obsessions.

Despite their flagrant betrayal of their promises, God stays with God’s chosen people – God does not turn away completely or give up. God is unhappy and hurt, and becomes angry at the betrayal. But God hears Moses imploring for the people and recalling God’s love and care for them, and continues to come back and invite God’s people back. God does not leave, and God calls God’s beloved back – here, and again, and again, and again through the whole of human history.

So, with that in mind, let's turn to Matthew. In today's reading, we continue in this rising tension and conflict between the religious leaders who want to knock Jesus down from his rising influence, and Jesus who is completely fed up with how the religious leaders are mishandling their entrusted responsibility.

It is a wonderful parable – at least, the gentler version we find in Luke. There's this noble and generous person, a certain man, who prepares a great banquet and sends servants to invite chosen guests. These guests refuse to come. The host gets angry and sends his servants to invite the poor and crippled and blind and lame – and then, when the hall is still not full, he sends the servants out again to bring people in from the roads and country lanes and everywhere until the hall is completely full. In Luke's version, Jesus is holding a beautiful vision of generosity, of welcome of all, of a banquet hall that seems to have room for everyone who does not refuse.

But Matthew's version of this parable has a very different feel. There is much hotter anger and violence, there is more display of power, there is intense judgment alongside generosity. I want you to consider with me two ways of reading this parable.

1. A simpler reading is to see the king as God. God is sending servants to invite people to a great feast, and offering invitations which get rejected. Then God invites more people, far beyond the original list, from everywhere, both the good and the bad who flow in and fill the banquet hall. Then, we have a guest who has shown up without wearing proper garments for a wedding feast, who showed up wearing whatever, who didn't seem to care about what was expected for this gathering community. And, not being able to answer why, the guest is tied up and thrown out into the outer darkness.

So we can make of this a picture of God's generosity in inviting everyone in, and of how it will be surprising who is at God's banquet table and who has refused the invitation. After all, that's most like how Luke tells the story.

But Matthew's picture is more complex and a bit more disturbing. What are we to make of a king who kills those who refuse to come to his party? What are we to make of a host-king who gets so upset over a guest from among the wide array of the good and the bad who happens to be wearing the wrong attire?

There seems to be God's judgment on the cruel and the arrogant who kill God's servants...

Matthew was written in a time following some of the early sufferings of the first and second generations of Jewish Christians and of Christians elsewhere – and in a time of rising discord of the Jewish people as a whole with Rome, and of Rome's turning of screws on the people of Israel. It was written somewhere between 70 AD and 85 AD, right around or in the years following the Jewish uprising against Rome and Rome's cruel crackdown that obliterated the temple and ransacked Jerusalem. There are ways in which people at this time wanted God to call

down judgment on all whose cruelty had led to such catastrophic trauma.

A recent theologian, Miraslov Volf, warns that Western, privileged people from developed nations enjoy the space to hold up the image of a God who is always and continuously gracious and loving, with no final judgment. But this is a luxury, and not a faith that brings comfort to those who are suffering under the cruelty of others. For those followers of Christ who have been cruelly mistreated, perhaps because of their faith, perhaps because of their social position or race or class or ethnic or regional identity, there is the desperate hope for God's vindicating judgment. It is an important voice to hear in scripture. And it is an important prayer to cry – for God's judgment to come on the oppressors and destroyers of the earth and of any part of humankind. And it is important to remember that it is God who brings just judgment – and it is not in our hands and not for us to take up AR-15s or other weapons to become self-appointed vigilantes for God.

God's banquet is with wide invitation but also with expectation of respect for the feast and the purpose of the feast. There are expectations of how one is to be in a shared community of celebration, and one should not be willful or cavalier

Analogy to today during a time of pandemic and its precautions, when we as a church have been clear that we will wear masks and keep precautionary distance from each other as an act of mutual care – and the signal given by one who does not wear a mask is a signal of placing self-interest and personal rights over the will and expectation of the community

2. But let's complicate this a bit further. Is God really like this, this king? On one hand, the image is incredibly generous. On the other hand, the king is incredibly demanding. Is God really like this, so full of grandiosity, so full of self-importance? Is God really like this, so full of vindictiveness that God would kill any who refuse and burn their cities? Is God really like this, so full of orderliness that God would cast into darkness any who dress improperly?
3. What if we don't really get to the punchline of what the kingdom of heaven is like until the end of the story? What if the kingdom of heaven is something that happens in a world where there are arrogant and vindictive kings, where leaders want their star-moments and do everything they can to fill their halls and their meeting rooms?

What if the king isn't really God in Matthew's understanding of the parable? What if the king is really more like King Herod, the ruler who built himself an opulent palace and who, in order to appear good to the people, put more money into rebuilding the temple and making it into a showy place of grandness – but who did not truly love God, and who treated other landowners and princes cruelly, and who did whatever necessary to make it seem that he had many fawning followers?

What are we to make of the wedding guest whose apparel was different, who seems to upset the apple-cart of the whole celebration just by his appearance?

Where is Jesus in this story? Where is the “Son of man”?

It is just before this that Jesus tells the religious leaders of the day, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”

What if we consider that the wedding guest whose apparel was different is Jesus – the one who, now in Jerusalem, was going to be rejected, bound, and cast into the darkness of the place of the skull outside the city?

What if the kingdom of heaven is like that? What if the kingdom of heaven is the way of the cross in a world caught up in its own self-justification among rulers caught in their own grandiosity and claims on others’ lives? What if the kingdom of heaven is standing apart in the midst of this world, enough to be noticed – even if the consequences of this place us outside all of the festivities going on around us?

This brings us to an important question, of what kind of kingdom we want, and what kind of kingdom Jesus opens for us and invites us into.

Whose will we choose to be? Who will be our God?

Christ the Lover of All Humankind invites us beyond all that we adore and serve in the disorders of this world, and to follow him, even to the outer darkness where there is weeping and pain, where he, the Son of God, the outcast, is bringing healing and new life; where new life is calling, and where Christ calls us to join him.