

I need not elaborate the stress and tension everywhere, the divided, polarized country that we have become. It is easier to attack others and have attack ads than to state some positive vision for our land. I hear that blood pressures are rising for many at just the thought political discussions, which are more often than not debates, or simply polarized attacks, as scathing as possible.

At such times, I think our only option as followers of Christ is to “double down,” insisting on good behavior, and doing our very best to keep the high road of Christ’s way when others may resort to low blows, ridicule, threats, etc. I am reminded of the famous saying by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that “The road is wide that leads to destruction, and many travel there. But the road is narrow that leads to life and few choose it.”

This theme runs through all of Jesus’ teachings, that we must pick up our cross if we are to follow him and find true life. That cross may be a willingness to suffer or sacrifice for another, it may be a cross of truthfulness and transparency about mistakes or suffering, when we would rather hide things and not disclose things, especially to those close to us.

The story or parable that we heard this morning about the kingdom or community of heaven, was about a banquet, a feast, and many invited had all sorts of excuses for not coming. Sound familiar? Church and spiritual communities look for people to come to feasts of worship, music, scripture and prayer, and often hear every excuse under the sun, one of the most common, is “we just got out of the habit.” In the story this morning, the excuses were all very good reasons (there ARE many other good things to be doing!), but Jesus is saying that in comparison with intentional communing with God (worship) most other priorities are mundane, temporal, fleeting. He says at the end of the story that those invited who stayed away would “not taste” the wonderful gifts of (God’s) banquet.

A theological question arises: was Jesus talking about a punishment for those who did not come to the banquet? In another banquet story in Matthew, specifically a wedding banquet as a symbol for God’s banquet, the ending has sin and punishment mentioned. One of the guests at the wedding was not wearing proper wedding clothes, so the “king” ordered him to be tied hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, where there would be weeping

and gnashing of teeth! We all cringe, and think, “did Jesus really say that?” I like to think that Jesus used “rhetorical excess” at times, just to really underscore a point. I also think that Jesus was very comfortable with metaphors, and it is important I believe to remember that even the 4 gospel writers, Matthew Mark Luke and John, had different emphases in their remembrances of Jesus. Yes Matthew has images of punishment for those who did not come, or did not come dressed properly. And Luke simply says they did not taste the banquet. One idea that gives me great comfort is that punishments attributed to God in the Bible are often self-punishment, as in “you made your bed, now lie in it!”

Rather than punishment from an angry God, we can think of CONSEQUENCES that we often bring upon ourselves for bad or ignorant behavior.

One of the very first weddings I officiated in my first church found the 18 year old groom coming to me before the wedding, saying he was sorry, but he had just had a several beers, admittedly to get up his courage. Should I have stopped the wedding right on the spot? Maybe. But his speech was not slurred, and I asked him if he loved her and really wanted to say vows to her. We went ahead, and the vows and ceremony went just fine. But in the banquet, the reception, the groom stormed out, and began to pace around the parking lot. When I reached him and asked what happened, he began to cry, saying he could not ban his brother from the wedding, as the bride had asked. Apparently the brother had a drug or alcohol problem and did come “under the influence,” which upset the bride. It was a very complicated two family therapy problem, and the best I could come up with on the spur of the moment was to ask him if he wanted to make the marriage a go, and if so, he better go back inside, take his bride aside, and make up. I said, “you fought in front of all these guests, so to save the marriage, you better show that you have made up in front of all of them as well!” So it was.

The reason I tell this story is that Jesus was using a wedding banquet as an example of receiving or not receiving God’s grace, and the consequences of receiving or ignoring it. In my story, there was not punishment from me, or from God, or from outside the wedding couple. They had really brought the distress upon themselves, the groom by drinking to try to mask his fears, and the bride by hard and

fast insistence that his brother could not attend the banquet. They had made those choices, not made any compromise with understanding, and they suffered the consequences, brought it upon themselves, the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that Jesus mentions on a couple occasions.

In Luke's version this morning, the emphasis is on the king or householder's generous invitation to all the good and the bad... Matthew also says that MANY are called. A takeaway from both versions of the story is that God's gift of grace, the gift of the food of heaven, a heavenly banquet is indeed offered to ALL people. It's just sad to say that many ignore the invitation, refuse it, or take it lightly, by showing up with the wrong attitude or perhaps with substance abuse, making up all kinds of excuses about other priorities. In this crazy world we now live in, we can't afford to push aside the ways of God, the higher road, the noble values in life. We can't afford to just go along with worldly values of competitions, war, or reckless partying, for we are destroying ourselves and reaping what we sow, finding harsh consequences for our ways.

In the analogy of a wedding feast, Jesus could have said that true and deep love will take some work, some compromise, some self-sacrifice, some giving up of things for the sake of the other with different needs and interests. The same is true for life in God, for the “kingdom of God.” To “taste” the wonders of God's love, peace and joy, we may have to give up some of our own mundane pleasures and compulsions. The wedding feast is both incredible gift of grace, and also something that takes some intention, some preparation, some dressing for the occasion (No, not just coat and tie or fancy dress)... but with, as Paul would say, clothing ourselves with the fruits of the spirit: love, peace, joy, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Without such preparation, focus, and intention, we will not “taste” the deeper fruits of God's Steadfast Love.

The parables of the banquets do have a rather stark dualistic feel to them; either the invited guests came to taste the host's banquet, or they ignored it, made light of it, were too busy for it, and thus “suffered the consequences.” Fr. Richard Rohr, great contemporary spiritual writer, founder of Center for Action and Contemplation, commented recently that with such bad behavior everywhere in society, it is good to remember one of the sayings of

their community: *“The best criticism of the bad... is the practice of the better!”* I love it! So I’ll say it again: *“The best criticism of the bad... is the practice of the better!”* Rather than spend so much time attacking, finding fault, trying to pinpoint sins, (who started the fight), walk the higher road, lead by example, show forth goodness and peace; it may be the strongest way to change some minds, or influence others to similar good behavior.

So I will close with some wonderful comments from Fr. Richard Rohr in his recent devotionals based on Francis of Assisi.

“Humans and creaturely world have as their vocation the duty to support and complete one another, not to compete against and destroy one another. We are call responsible for the life of the natural environment, showing gratitude and respecting nature's proper limits, not pushing the planet to the brink of ecological disaster.”

On the beauty and Godliness of living more simply, as did St. Francis: *“when we agree to live simply, we put ourselves outside of others ability to buy us off, reward us falsely, or control us by money, status, salary, punishment, and loss or gain of anything. This is a most radical level of freedom, but of course, it is not easy to come by.*

When we agree to live simply, we have little energy to defend or protect our group, our ethnicity, our country, our money, and our religion. Our circle is no longer defined by these external qualities, because we now find the joy and beauty of the real essentials in the actual center which is God.”

Living simply, in the way of community building, the way of Christ, is indeed not easy. It is not going along with the crowd. It is a narrow road, but it leads to true life, peace, love and joy. Shall we join this wedding feast, our marriage or communion with God. We are all surely invited and grace is plentiful. Let’s not ignore or make light of the invitation, but come, seek, be a part of God’s feast of steadfast love..... in words, parables, stories, and music..... Amen.