

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
October 15, 2023 - The 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Searching for Grace

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one Lord and Mother of us all.

On Wednesday, Fr. Oswald and I had lunch with the new minister at the United Methodist church up the street. Pastor Gary. He's great. In the course of "talking shop" about our different ministries, he mentioned that he has moved away from using the lectionary readings for Sunday worship, these prescribed Biblical passages for every Sunday of the year. Instead, he preaches on a topic over multiple weeks. There are real merits to preaching topically; it lends itself to creativity and to more directly talking about a particular subject that a particular congregation might need to hear. I also refrain from criticizing because the older I get the more hang-ups I seem to shed, and who knows, this time next year I might be doing a sermon series myself. "Taylor Swift and the Gospel of John."

But it begs the question: why keep using the lectionary? The biggest 2 reasons are that it connects us to all the other church traditions using these same texts: From RCs to American Baptists to Lutherans...etc. And second, it helps protect the congregation from the potentially narrow preferences of the pastor. I'm sure some pastors manage it well, but left to my own devices, I might end up choosing, without even knowing it, very similar Biblical material, based on the themes which resonate with me personally.

But I think there's another reason to stick with the lectionary. It also brings us face to face with some of the hardest passages in the Bible, like this one from Matthew this morning. I wonder if there is something about the process of having to hunt for good news in the midst of all this bad news which builds up our spiritual muscles to do this just not for Scripture, but in the rest of life. In passages like this we have to search for a life-giving Word from God. Perhaps this encourages us, strengthens us in the habit of searching for grace amidst the brokenness of the world.

Here is my crude summary of this long, hard parable as Matthew tells it: King's son marries; king throws party. King invites guests; guests snub king. King enraged. (End of guests.) King starts over. King invites more guests: anyone and everyone. This time (big surprise), guests come. King inspects guests; one guest inappropriately dressed. King enraged. (End of guest.) Is there a word of grace in a passage so full of violence, revenge, and expulsion?

Often our first step in excavating a passage is to see how it compares to other passages that tell the same story. As it happens, the gospel of Luke features a similar parable, but there it is much more user-friendly, much more explicitly gracious. In Luke's telling, the invited guests are too

busy to come to the wedding banquet, but they don't kill the king's messenger. And so, in turn, there is no revenge by the king. Also, there is no mention of the person without the proper wedding clothes for the banquet. The whole thrust of the parable for Luke is this surprise invitation to all the people who usually do not get invited: In Luke we read, "Go out at once into the streets...and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." When all that has been done, the king's servant comes back and says, "I have done this and there is still room." Then the master said, 'Go back out into the roads and lanes...so that my house may be filled.'" So inclusive. So generous. So intentionally full of honor for the people so often left out. This is the kind of gospel message that we Episcopalians could hear all day long. Who needs Taylor Swift? Three cheers for Luke.

This version of the story is shaped by who Luke is: a Gentile. Luke himself surely feels like one of these surprise guests, a former pagan who used to have to constantly try to curry favor with a pantheon of in-fighting gods, now, incredibly, finds himself at the Great Banquet of Love made possible by the life, death and resurrection of the Jewish Messiah who has come to pull in the whole world into this way of Love.

But today we are tasked with exploring Matthew's version. Is there any shred of grace, here? You know, there's this whole new framework that we are just beginning to use in which when someone presents us with words or behavior which are hard to understand, instead of our first question being: "What's wrong with you?" we are beginning to ask, "What happened to you? Is there possibly some trauma underneath your perspective?" So we might ask, "Matthew, "what happened to you?"

Unlike Luke, Matthew is a Jew, who believes Jesus was the Messiah. And what has recently happened in Matthew's Jewish community? I think it's almost impossible for us to fathom the trauma of the Romans decimating Jerusalem and burning the Temple. We got a small taste of this historical event on October 7. Hamas' intentional destruction of women, children and men was a fraction of a fraction of what happened in 70 A.D. Responding to a Jewish uprising, sixty thousand roman soldiers laid siege around the walls of Jerusalem for 5 months. And when they finally went in, they burned much of the city to the ground. Estimates for the number of men, women and children killed range between $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population - 300,000 to a million people. Most scholars agree that at least 80,000 were kidnapped and enslaved in other parts of the Empire.¹

All of this happens perhaps 10, 15 years before Matthew's gospel comes out. For Matthew's community, it must have felt like utter catastrophe was crouching right outside the door. And when the stakes are that high, you can't always afford the breezy, "hey look how awesome things are" attitude of Luke. You need to go a step further. In parables like this one, Matthew is saying

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(70_CE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70_CE))

to his community, “Yes, you have been brought to the table. But soon you will be back out there, living your faith in the midst of violent chaos. When all hell breaks loose, are you going to respond like Jesus would? Have you begun to shape your life now, so that under immense pressure, your life will actually bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, kindness, gentleness, self-control.

Most Episcopalians do not like the song, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” We cut it from the Hymnal 1982. Rightly so, given the ways Christians have often used violence in the name of God. But the benefit of that metaphor is that soldiers are down on the ground, in real conflict with evil, and they are called to be disciplined, honorable, courageous, seriously committed to the mission. They have been drilled and drilled to perform under stress.

And maybe this helps with the most disturbing part of Matthew’s parable: the guest who does not have the right clothes. We don’t get a reason why violating the dress code triggers the king. But maybe it’s like the soldier who comes back from leave and lines up for inspection, still in his flip-flops and baggy shorts. It’s not the flip-flops that will get him cast out of the barracks. It’s what the flip-flops say about his attitude: casual, uncommitted to the group, uncommitted to the mission.

So while Luke offers the grace of comfort, Matthew goes a step further and offers the grace of challenge, the grace of a wake-up call. Are we serious about following this way of Love in the midst of all the darkness and hate in our world? For yes, we are so incredibly blessed to be so insulated from real war. We pray for the Israelis and now, especially for the Palestinians. But I don’t think I have to convince you that we are in dark times of our own. Culturally, guns rumble in the distance. I think all of us are sort of braced, tensed for this next year.

The grace of this passage is that it makes us pause. Makes us ask: Am I serious about following the Way of Jesus? Am I being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ? Am I kinder, more generous, more forgiving, today than I was a year ago? Am I more loving to my friends AND those I perceive as enemies than I was a year ago? Am I more loving to myself today than I was a year ago? If not, why not? What is holding me back? What in me may need to be pulled out and cast aside, so that I can be more a channel of the love of Christ?

I’ll end with a prayer:

Gracious God, you lift up the lowly and place them at your side. We thank you that we have been given an unearned place at your Banquet Table of Love. Help us to search for the light amidst the darkness, to hunt for your grace in the brokenness of the world and in our lives. Transform us with your Spirit, so that no matter what comes we have the strength and courage and discipline to walk your way of Love. In the name of the Prince of Peace we pray, Amen.