

Proper 23 Year A  
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A number of years ago, Presbyterian pastor and theologian Robert McAfee Brown wrote a book called *Making Peace in the Global Village*. Published in the early 1980's, it was a book advocating non-violence and a step back from the nuclear brinksmanship that was the current climate of international discourse between countries that didn't get along. But what I remember best about the book is summarized in the title of one of the chapters of the book: "To the poor, Violence is an empty stomach."

His point is well taken: violence can take many forms: not just war, but economic marginalization. Not just murder, but also systemic racism. Brown's point was to raise our awareness of the subtle and destructive patterns that weave themselves in and out of our personal and communal lives---not to condemn our human failings, but to raise our awareness of them. For it is only by becoming aware of what makes for violence that we can begin to really practice those things that make for peace. An interesting and powerful examination of violence, choice and the consequences of our choices. But subtle.

Matthew, on the other hand, we have figured out by this time of our year a lectionary cycle, is not one to be subtle when talking about important topics. While we find this tale of the wedding banquet and it's negligent guests in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Thomas, it is only Matthew who portrays the host of the party in such violent terms. (It is a wonder that any of us would want to attend the banquet of this guy, whose response to his declining guests is to get revenge!)

We can perhaps forgive Matthew for his tendency towards hyperbole if we remember that he was a Jew communicating to other Jews--who were under siege from both the Romans and the hierarchy of their own tradition who were themselves, at the time, in bed with the Romans. It was a very dicey time for the Jews, and for Matthew, it is only by becoming aware of what makes for death of the soul that we can really begin to do those things that give the soul life.

But of more importance, I think, is that banquet that Jesus is so interested in us attending. The violent imagery is but a tool used by Matthew to underscore the extreme importance of our *acceptance of the invitation* to the banquet God offers to all of us. And it is no less than a life changing decision to accept the invitation.

*And, perhaps most important of all:* God is so determined to give the party, the banquet we Christians have come to call the Kingdom, that when God gives that banquet, God is going to do what it takes to assure that there are people to party with.

So, if we are to drop our nets into this rich passage here is what we learn: Even more than the importance of our own accepting the invitation to the banquet *is the persistence of God* in filling the banquet hall with those who will join him in the celebration of the marriage of heaven and earth. More than anything else, I think, this is a tale meant to remind us of God's persistent desire that we come to a party -- that we feast at the banquet which Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is more than a little ironic I think, that we have this tale of a wedding banquet for this morning's Gospel reading, this morning where you all and I embark on a new life together. A marriage, of sorts, and in the years that I know we will spend together, God will be throwing a banquet, for us.

In an odd turn of metaphor, we will be both the object of God's joy, as we feast on the presence of God's love unfolding among us, here, in this little piece of the kingdom, and we will be the stewards of the banquet, as we participate in the unfolding of the kingdom in the world we live in--the world of our families, our community and the global village itself.

I need to tell you, I don't know what any of that will look like. I am not here because I have a specific idea of what this parish needs to do or be or become. I see much promise, many possible pathways to explore---in the people you are, in the building that is the home of this faith community, in the needs of the geographic area in which it is placed, in the world and world events which is the context of our life together. I can't even begin to tell you what Church of the Advent will look like in 3 or 5 years.

But, I can promise you this, that our coming together, our process of building a community of trust and affection, our work to better understand the teachings, the life and the witness of Jesus to the nature of God's love, all of that counts as invitation to a banquet--a feast we Christians call the Kingdom of Heaven----and we will be fed by that banquet, and we will be changed by it, deepened by it, formed by it, and in listening together to the still small voice of the Spirit, we will discover how to share that kingdom with a world hungry to participate in the feast of God's love, the banquet Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven, which, Jesus teaches does break out, abundantly, if we but have ears to hear and eyes to see, it breaks out, within us, among us, between us, right here, right not, on earth, a glimpse of things heavenly. A glimpse of God.

May God bless our years together, this marriage of Lynn and the people of the Church of the Advent, and may we become the blessing to the world God calls us to be. Amen.