

Three Possible Meanings

Proper 23A - Oct. 9, 2011

The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel mike. And as he preached, he moved briskly about the platform jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, Getting wound up in the cord and nearly tripping before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks, A little girl in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, "If he gets loose, will he hurt us?"

Trying to figure out how best to talk about today's Gospel lesson has been a maddening process this week because there is such a wide range of opinions about how to interpret it. There is the traditional version, the approach recommended by the scholar Marty Aiken & that of the scholars of the Westar Institute. I think the traditional interpretation is the least likely.

First, let's review the story. A "secular ruler," i.e., a king has planned a splendid wedding banquet in honor of his son. It was the custom of the time to send two invitations: one early to let everyone know that an event is being planned & another close to the day of. The slaves are sent to all the Who's Who, the socially prominent, the power-brokers who have the favor of the king to offer the initial invitation. All of them decline the first invitation. When the second invitation goes out people tell the slaves that they are just too busy to attend the king's feast. When the king was told that he was too far down on their list of priorities to be bothered with, he has them all executed and their city burned to the ground. It was a horrific, brutal response to their rejection of him. The slaves are then once again sent out to invite ordinary people; to gather people off the street to attend. By that time, word had no doubt spread about what had happened to those who had turned down the king's invitation & the king had absolutely no trouble filling the banquet hall. At the end of the story, the king inspects his guests & discovers that one of them is not wearing the proper wedding garment. The king confronts the man, but the man is unable to give a reason for his clothing infraction. At that point, the king orders that the man's hands & feet be shackled & that the man be thrown into a dark, terrifying dungeon.

The most popular, traditional interpretation suggests that the king represents God; the banquet hall - the Kingdom of Heaven; the well-off who reject the king's invitation are those who are too busy to respond to God's invitation to follow Jesus, too preoccupied to give their hearts over to loving God, too busy to find time to worship God each week; the ordinary men & women who do attend are the unexpected who are surprisingly found to have God's favor; & the man who does not have the correct wedding attire represents those who hear & respond to God's call, but insist on holding onto their sins & sinful lifestyles. This is the most popular interpretation among preachers because it gives us a chance to talk about salvation, judgment at the end of time &, of course, our responsibility as Christians to prioritize the worship of God. However, interpreting the story this way has a severe problem; the image of God in this story is one of murderous brutality, an explosive temper & a profound thirst for revenge. This is nothing like the God of Jesus; nothing like the image of

God we see in the love & compassion of our Master Teacher. Jesus would never have told a story that made God out to be a cruel butcher.

The second possibility I think is much stronger. Marty Aiken suggests that instead of seeing the king as representing God, this king would have sparked in Jesus' audience memories of kings much closer to their situation in history, namely, the Herods, especially the first King Herod. Because of historical sources such as Josephus, we know the Herods actually behaved in ways very similar to the king in this parable. Then who is the figure in this parable that makes us think of the kingdom of heaven? The person without a wedding garment at the end who seems to intentionally take on this king's brutality. Aiken points to a verse in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 11:12: **"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force"** The kingdom of heaven as suffering violence is represented in this parable not through the figure of the king who dishes it out, but in the lone figure at the end who takes it upon himself. When we remember that Jesus tells this story only shortly before his arrest and his silence at his trial, it seems this story is about how the powers of this world seek to crush & eliminate anyone who is perceived to stand in their way.

According to this explanation, we are being warned that if we choose to love God & to follow the faith & teachings of Jesus, we may find ourselves outside of the system; we may be judged by those in authority or by majority opinion to be: a problem, trouble-makers, people who "rock the boat," nonconformists, men & women who stand up & say things the king and/or the majority do not want to hear. Have you found that to be true in your own walk with Christ? Have there been moments when you refused to "just go along to get along" at the office & were punished for it? Have there been times when you felt you had to tell the truth to a spouse, a boss or a politician knowing full-well that such honesty would probably result in that person being angry with you? How many of us connect our Christianity to making public & sometimes unpopular stands on behalf of the poor, the voiceless & the marginalized in our city and county? Do we have the courage to receive the rejection & brutality of those who demand that we "go along to get along," that we remain passive & silent in the face of injustice?

In closing, the scholars at Westar think Matthew added a lot to Jesus' original story. Here's the version they think is most authentic to Jesus. An anonymous host gave a dinner party. He sent invitations to 3 potential guests who may have had some social standing in the community. They refused for quite legitimate reasons. At banquet time, the host's servants inform the 3 that the feast is ready as was the established practice of the time. All the guests refuse to come and that's the surprising twist in the story. The host then dispatches the servants to collect the more socially marginal who are very surprised to be included & very happy to accept the invitation. This shorter, simpler & likely more authentic version of the story sounds & feels like the Jesus we know & love; a prophet who constantly warned of the dangers to one's faith in God of too much power, affluence & comfort; a prophet who loved radically & accepted completely; a prophet who thought God's invitation was and is to all of us. How will you respond to God's invitation? AMEN.