

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Eric Nord

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23 Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

I want to begin with the Exodus 32 text, and by asking the question Judy used to frame the sermon a few weeks ago. Who is God in this passage? That question seems to open a real can of worms. In our Exodus reading God seems to be enraged, ready to wipe Israel out, in spite of all God's previous promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses is the hero, talking God down, and saving the people of Israel, even though it means rejecting God's offer to make a great nation of Moses. In a way, Moses' argument with God here is pretty weak. Since Moses himself is a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God could wipe out Israel, make a great nation of Moses, and the promises to the patriarchs would still be fulfilled.

Who is God here? How do we reconcile the promises of God to the patriarchs (which Moses reminds God of in verses 13-14) with God's statement in verse 10 (*My wrath ... will consume them*)? Would God really wipe out his chosen people? Does Moses really change God's mind here? Is God really a God who destroys entire nations of people? How do we reconcile that with the extravagant love of God communicated to us by Jesus?

Is it possible that this is a story that Moses tells in his wrath to "put the fear of God" into the people? Perhaps, but I don't really like that explanation. Another possible explanation is that God is somehow testing Moses. We have accounts of God testing Abraham, of Abraham arguing with God for the sake of any righteous in Sodom, and of Jacob wrestling with God (but Jacob's wrestling was motivated by seeking a blessing for himself, while Moses and Abraham were seeking to preserve the life of others).

Moses here plays the role we later see as that of Jesus—he intercedes for the people. He "talks God down," reminding God of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even when God proposes to make a disaster for Israel into a blessing/promise for Moses (*I will make of you a great nation*), Moses still argues with God on behalf of the people.

Let's ask the question again: Who is God in this passage? If we look back at Exodus 19 and 20, where the covenant is established and the laws are given, God introduces/defines Godself as the one who brought the people out of Egypt. God is the one who brought them out of Egypt. But in verse 1, the people attribute this to Moses, and then in verse 4 Aaron attributes the deliverance to *your gods*.

By the way, what is going on with Aaron here? We're told he makes the idol, but when Moses questions him, he says "I threw the gold into the fire and this came out." Is he lying to the prophet of God? It sure seems like it. It also seems like he gets away with lying about this. He remains high priest. I don't know what we should make of that. As the priestly role is defined in the Torah, it seems to be more that of representing the people to God, and not speaking for God to the people (that seems to be the role of judges and then of prophets).

Who is God in this passage? God here is one who has been rejected. The people have accepted the salvation God provided, but are not giving God credit for it. They are accepting God's gift, but rejecting God. In our psalm (106, verse 20) we see that *they exchanged the glory of God for*

the image of an ox that eats grass. I want to suggest that the real, or central, problem with idolatry is that when we make an idol of something, we ascribe power and worth to that which is ultimately powerless and worthless (or of limited power/worth), and we reject the power and worth of God. Who is God in this passage? God is the one who has been rejected.

I want to turn now to our Gospel reading (Matthew 22:1-14), and begin by reminding us of the context of this parable. In Matthew 21 we have the Triumphal Entry, cleansing of the Temple, cursing of the fig tree, Jesus' authority questioned, parables of the two sons and of the wicked tenants in the vineyard. Today's text is followed by questioning of Jesus—about paying taxes, the resurrection, and the greatest commandment. In the Triumphal Entry and the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet in his confrontation of the religious authorities of his day. He has publically questioned their authority and they can no longer ignore him. The authorities have responded in the way that authorities of questionable legitimacy inevitably respond when the legitimacy of their authority is questioned. They begin to attack Jesus (of course, we know that they will ultimately kill Jesus). Jesus responds first with the parable of the two sons, and next with the parable of the wicked tenants. Then he lays this story out. Let's take another look.

A king throws a wedding banquet for his son, but the people who he invited change their minds, they have better things to do.

Kenneth Bailey, commenting on the Luke version of this story, notes that the servants are going out with the message, "the feast is ready". This is the second invitation. Those who were invited (first invitation) agreed to come, and now are backing out. The invitees are placing higher priority on just about anything else (...one to his farm, another to his business...) than on the invitation. Their rejection of the second invitation is a rejection of the host. No wonder the king is mad! This is really a slap in the face.

This parable can be read as a continuation of the parables of the two sons and of the wicked tenants. Those who were invited (elders, priests, Levites) were not worthy, as evidenced by their rejection of the invitation and the host, so the invitation is given to others—in fact, to all. This could also be read as "Israel was not worthy, so the invitation goes out to all nations"—Gentiles included.

Note the connection with Exodus 32: The King becomes enraged and destroys the cities of those who had been invited but refused to come, rejecting and mistreating the messengers and also the invitation. In Exodus 32 the people are rejecting God, and God is (apparently) about to destroy them in his rage. In both stories, God is the one who has been rejected.

In verses 11-14 of the Gospel text we learn that a man without a wedding robe was found at the party and the king had him thrown out. What do we make of this part of the story? Why was this man not wearing a wedding robe? Did he not have one (poverty)? Was he just slow on the uptake (cluelessness)? Was he intentionally flouting the social norm here (stubbornness)? His silence in response to the king's question, *How did you get in here without a wedding robe?*, might indicate stubbornness (refusal to answer the king), or it might indicate cluelessness (really doesn't know how to act), or it might indicate poverty (too embarrassed to answer the king). It is hard to tell

what is going on here. However, the king's question is different! Not "Why are you not wearing a robe?" but "How did you get in here without a robe?" This makes it sound like there were bouncers making sure people didn't get in if they didn't follow the dress code, but this fellow managed to sneak past them somehow.

There is an apparent contradiction here—on the one hand, in verse 9 the servants *invite everyone*, and yet if you aren't dressed right you will be *bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.... It seems there is both an open invitation by God here as well as a response required from us, and responding to the invitation is more than just "showing up." If we read this as this fellow somehow snuck past the bouncers, then maybe the message is, "You can't sneak into the Kingdom".

Richard Gardner (Matthew, Believer's Church Bible Commentary Series, Herald Press, 1991) puts it this way: "According to Matthew, there are two ways a person can lose the opportunity to eat at God's table. One way is to snub the invitation. The other is to take the invitation for granted, and fail to live as those who truly hunger and thirst for God's righteousness."

Who are we in these passages? Can we be anything other than the willful, broken people in the Exodus text? In the Matthew text are we the ones who reject the invitation, or the ones who receive the second invitation and show up? If we are among those who show up, are we the ones who live as those who truly hunger and thirst for God? Or are we like the fellow without the robe?

How are we unprepared? What have we failed to put on in preparation for the banquet? Matthew tells us that the first invitees went off *...one to his farm, another to his business...* If we understand the Exodus text and the Gospel text today as both being about rejecting God, we can see that the things that draw our attention away from God be understood as idols.

Now if we turn to our epistle reading (Philippians 4:1-9), we find Paul is telling us to *...stand firm in the LORD in this way...*(verse 1). What is *this way*? If we look back at Philippians 3 Paul says *...no confidence in the flesh...press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God...many live as enemies of the cross...their god is their belly, their glory is their shame...our citizenship is in heaven. This way* seems to be a full trust in God's power, and a rejection of worldly power. Paul goes on to say, "Don't worry about things but instead bring your worries to God, and God's peace, beyond understanding (beyond logic?) will guard your hearts and your minds (verses 6-7)." "Fix your attention on the good things God is doing – the true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy (verse 8)." Paul ends by saying, "Keep on in the way I have taught you (verse 9)." On its own this could sound prideful, but together with verse 8 it seems to say, "Keep your eyes open for what God is up to in the world, and follow that lead."

Does this give us a way to avoid idolatry? If idolatry is about misplaced honor, misplaced love, misplaced trust, and misplaced loyalty, Paul's advice here is about proper attribution. If we follow Paul's advice in verses 8-9, we keep our antennae up for what God is doing in the world. Rather than attributing God's good work to something/someone else, we look for things that we can attribute to God. I don't mean a shallow, "I got a parking space today thanks to God's intervention" type of looking. Paul tells us to be on the lookout for what is true, honorable, just,

pure... If we follow this advice, we will be keeping our senses attuned to what is really good in the world. To borrow Bryan Moyer Suderman's image, we become "detectives of divinity". If we really do this, maybe we can avoid mis-attributing God's good work to other powers. Maybe we can stop rejecting God.

I want to return to the idea of peoplehood. Had God carried through on this threat in Exodus 32, destroying the people of Israel and replacing them with Moses' offspring, do you really think they would have been more faithful to God? I am quite certain they would not have been. I suggest that there is an inevitable problem with peoplehood based on Genetics – the "in/out" lines are too easy to draw, and those who place themselves on the "in" side of the line view their "in-ness" as a birthright, rather than as a gift. I don't know if this is something that has been a problem for Free Methodists – I know it has been a problem among my Mennonite kinfolk. Our own "peoplehood" can become an idol!

Our Psalm (106, verses 4-5) shows part of the problem with this "birthright peoplehood" system. The psalmist talks about *Favor to your people* and *Prosperity of your chosen ones*. Yet when we read about the Davidic kings, we learn that where Israel once endured forced labor in Egypt, they later impose forced labor on peoples living among them—the very thing from which they celebrated God's deliverance of them, they impose on others. Verse 5 shows a very "Hebrew-centric" understanding of God's purposes. Contrast this to the King in Matthew 22 saying, *Invite everyone you find*. When this is read after the parables of the two sons and the vineyard owner, we have a strong impression that God is not as concerned about lineage as we might be.

The culture wars we are living today in America are also about peoplehood. Some groups form around a peoplehood based on skin color. Other groups proclaim a peoplehood based on "rightness". If you care about the "right" things, you are in. If you don't show that you have the "right" kind of ideas, or values, then you are not among the "in" group. This may be about race, but cultural identity is a major factor. "Virtue signaling" of various kinds is really about declaring ourselves—which group is "my people".

It is pretty easy for me to see the splinter in the eye of someone else here. I can tell you all about someone else's idolatry, about the idolatry of "those people". But it is much harder for me to be aware of the log in my own eye, of the idolatry of "my people".

I am starting to suspect that economic security may be an idol for many of us—I confess that it is for me. What are our other idols? I can't tell you that—we need each other for that.

I wonder if part of the genius of Paul's advice about seeking out what God is up to by focusing on what is "true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy (verse 8)" is that it helps us break down the many "us vs. them" divides we build up? Maybe we need our brothers and sisters whom we so easily place among "those people" to help us identify the log in our own eyes. Maybe when we really become "detectives of divinity," we will know whose vision we can trust to help us identify our own idols.