

Mile 20: Many Are Called

March 7, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 22:1-14

So, today we are continuing in our Lenten sermon series, journeying our way through the second half of Matthew's gospel and looking at some of the hard, challenging, sometimes even scandalous stories and teachings that we find there – stories so challenging that they feel a little bit like the hardest stretch – miles 18-23 – of running a marathon:

- “Take up your cross,” Jesus says.
- “Any who want to find their life must lose it.”
- “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”
- “Not seven, but seventy times seven” is how many times you are to forgive.

And as we walk our way through each one of these stories, and work through the challenges of each of them, we start to see a picture emerging of what the kingdom of God looks like. The kingdom of God is a place of radical, no-holds-barred selflessness. It is a place where humility is prized over success; where vulnerability and openness is seen as strength and guardedness and self-protection is weakness. It is a place where we can only truly discover who we are by *letting go* and allowing ourselves to be moved and changed by God. It is a place where mistakes and slights and whoopsie daisies do not define us; where we are not held captive by the mistakes of our past, but where we are set free to learn and grow. It is a place where grudges and old wounds do not have any power over us, and where things that are broken will be restored.

This is a really, really beautiful picture of what the kingdom of heaven is all about. When I look at it this way, it is a kingdom that I absolutely, without question, want to be a part of. But the flip side of this, is that the kingdom of God looks so different from the world that we live in now. And in so many ways it runs contrary to the ways that we as human beings – especially we as 21st Century Americans – have been conditioned to operate. We prize independence. Self-sufficiency. We value hard work, and tend to put up on a pedestal those who are wealthy or beautiful or influential or powerful or what we might view as wildly successful. If somebody wrongs us, our first impulse is not to forgive – it is to slap them with a lawsuit and take them for all they are worth. And the last thing that we want is to be seen as weak – and so we will hide our vulnerabilities, and hide our feelings, and tell everyone we are “okay” or “fine,” trying to be “strong,” when silently we are dying inside.

It is no wonder that depression and anxiety and other mental health challenges have become so ubiquitous. We have been, over the course of our lives, trained to act in a

way that is contrary to the way we have been created. A way of living that is at odds with our fundamental makeup as children of God. And over time, that takes a toll, both mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

And I'm getting on us a bit as Americans, but it is not just an American thing. It is a human thing. That has gone back centuries. Millennia, even. And this is partly why Jesus' words to his followers are so harsh. "You need a course correction," he is telling them – and us. "You have forgotten who you are, and it is not working for you. So let me put this in terms that you can understand." Be like a child. Forgive as though you had just been forgiven a \$6 billion debt. And in today's story, "come to the feast."

Today's scripture reading is one that is deeply grounded in the rest of scripture. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son."

"The kingdom of heaven is a feast. An extravagant, lavish, over-the-top, joy-filled feast."

The idea of the kingdom of heaven as a great banquet feast is not a new one. In fact, it is woven throughout scripture. And it is an interesting and important image. Because in biblical times food was not always something that people had in abundance. They didn't have fully-stocked grocery stores with shelf-stable staples year-round. You couldn't just go to the store in November or December if you had a craving for strawberries. And if you wanted pumpkin pie in...say...May, you were pretty much out of luck. They were *wholly* dependent on the growing seasons. And on average, about once every three years or so they found themselves facing drought or famine, and there would not be enough food to go around. They could not afford to be wasteful with their food – they had to plan carefully and preserve carefully and eat modestly and not throw anything away. Their very lives depended on it.

So when God says in Isaiah 25 that on God's holy mountain "the Lord will make for all peoples...a feast of rich food filled with marrow, a feast of well-aged wines strained clear," he is saying to them that in God's kingdom, not only will no person ever go hungry; not only will God provide for their needs and not only will they not need to live in fear anymore of the harvest that might not come, but God will feed his people decadently. Luxuriously.

And then, God takes that one step further, in the book of Deuteronomy. Sometimes we think of Deuteronomy as being dry drudgery and ancient, outdated laws that we no longer have to follow. But sometimes, there is some really good stuff in there. In chapter 14, God is talking about a "tithe." But this tithe is not the 10% of the people's income that was supposed to be set aside for the Levites that we base our modern idea of tithing on. This tithe was a *second* tithe. After the people had set aside the firstfruits of their harvest to offer to God, the *second* 10% was to be used to throw a glorious,

lavish feast. *Everybody* in the community was to take 10% of their harvest and bring that to the temple, or to their synagogue, or to their place of worship, and use that harvest to throw a party. A wild, raucous, extravagant, wasteful party. Every year. And then, every third year, that party was to be thrown not for those who bring the food, but for those on the down-and-outs of society. The widows and the orphans and the resident aliens and the Levites, and those who had nothing and had no way of providing for themselves and no way of contributing to society.

In essence, God was saying to the Israelites, “I want you to learn how to trust me. Trust that I will provide for you, even when times are lean. But more than that, I want you to get a little taste of what is to come. A little glimpse – the tiniest taste – of the kingdom of God, right here and right now. A kingdom where all are cared for and no one goes hungry; a kingdom of laughter and joy and abundance. Where you don’t have to count every grain of wheat, hoping that there will be enough tomorrow, but where you can eat and enjoy with reckless abandon.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like a wedding banquet. Like a party. Like a feast. That a king sets for his son.” So, not just any feast – not just any banquet – but a feast fit for royalty. A feast where no one is counting the cost. This is going to be the event of this generation. The thing that everyone is going to be talking about. It is big, it is lavish, it is outrageous. No expense will be spared. Who in the world wouldn’t want to be a part of that?

But as we read further in this parable, evidently the king’s friends are too busy to be bothered with an extravagant party. Some were too busy. Others just weren’t interested. Some people didn’t really like the king or his son all that much – they were mad about this decision or that decision that the king had made. Some said, “I think I’m doing just fine on my own. I don’t need a banquet. Wedding banquets are just filled with a bunch of hypocrites, anyway.” And still others thought they might get a laugh out of mocking and ridiculing and even beating and killing the king’s servants.

The table is set. The feast is prepared. The king has gone above and beyond and poured everything of himself into this feast. It is an act of deep love and profound grace, the extents of which are difficult to fathom. And yet, nobody came.

And so the king gets furious, has all of his friends executed, and then says to his servants, “invite everyone. I’m not talking about those people who claimed to be my followers but clearly were not. I’m talking, *everyone*. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Fishermen. Beggars. Lepers. The unclean. Widows with only one mite to their name. Samaritan women and Canaanite women. Magi and fortune tellers. The very, very young and the very, very old. Everyone who doesn’t look or act like they belong. This party is now for them.”

And then, in typical Matthew fashion, Jesus takes the parable just one step further – taking it from a slightly challenging story with a good message to something really, really hard. Leading me to ask, yet again, “Matthew...Jesus...why couldn’t you have just stopped there? That would’ve been a lovely place to stop.”

But he doesn’t. He goes on to tell the story of one person who came in from off the streets, and he wasn’t dressed right. He wasn’t wearing a wedding robe. And so the king got furious – yet again. And he had him thrown out “into the outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

So setting aside the fact that this king seems to have some anger issues that he should maybe get addressed, there are a couple of much bigger points here that Jesus seems to be making:

1. God has set a feast for us. And the radical, profound grace that God pours out for us; the deep and abiding and unwavering care; the unending and unfathomable degree of forgiveness that we have been offered; the lavish food and drink that has been set before us...the magnitude and the intensity of God’s grace is absolutely staggering. But when we treat this profound grace with contempt – when we start to believe that we are too busy for it, or too good for it, or don’t really need it...when we begin acting as though we don’t really need God at all...when we begin treating God’s servants – God’s children – with contempt and scorn...God does not respond kindly to that.
2. Although all are invited to God’s banquet feast – no matter our background or our status or anything else – when we come to God’s party – when we experience the radical grace of God – we will be changed. God changes us from the inside-out, and we begin to take on the garments of the kingdom of God, shedding some of those things that we came in with that don’t fit us well – like our desires for power and control and self-reliance – and taking on garments fit for the kingdom of God – like openness, and forgiveness, and mercy, and joy. And if that *doesn’t* happen, if we are brought face-to-face with God’s reckless love and we are not moved by that; changed by that – then there is something very much wrong. The issue wasn’t that the homeless man came into the wedding feast wearing the only clothes he owned. The issue was that when he found himself in the presence of God, he wouldn’t let God transform him. In the same way that the king’s friends couldn’t be bothered to make an effort, neither could this man.

So here are our challenges for this week. Two weeks ago we were invited to practice humility, and last week we were invited to practice forgiveness, beginning with gratitude. This week, our challenge is to practice showing up. And here are some simple ways that we might do that:

1. Reflect on who you were 20 years ago, and who you are today. How have you changed over the last 20 years? What garments have you shed, and which ones

- have you taken on? What garments do you still need to shed to make room for something new?
2. Take some time every day – even if it is only 10 or 15 or 20 minutes – and intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. Maybe you light a candle to represent the flame of the Holy Spirit guiding you, and then you spend that time, either in silence – listening for the voice of God speaking to your soul, or maybe you spend that time in prayer. Or maybe that’s your time for a devotional practice, or scripture reading. Whatever resonates with you. Recognize that the banquet table in the kingdom of God has been set – and we simply need to show up.
 3. Remember that one thing God loves is a feast. A party. A wild, raucous, good time. So do something indulgent this week. Take an extra nap. Or eat a slice of cheesecake. Or treat yourself to a meal out so that you don’t have to cook. Start a new project or wear a fancy dress to the grocery store or put a vacation on the calendar. Something that will remind you that the grace of God is lavish and the kingdom of God is full of richness and delight.