

“Set them Free”

Sermon for Sunday October 12th, 2008 by The Rev. Joe Summers
(Readings: Exodus 32:1-14, Psalm 23, Phil. 4:1-9, Matt. 22:1-14)

On this mountain I will make--for all peoples-- a feast of rich food.
A feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And I will destroy on this mountain the shroud,
the shroud that has been cast over all peoples
the sheet that is spread over all nations
I will swallow up death forever.
I will wipe away the tears from all faces.
And the disgrace of my people will be taken away from all the earth.
On that day they will say-- Lo-- this is our God
who we have been waiting for so that we might be saved.
This is our God for whom we have waited, let us be glad
and rejoice in God's salvation. Isaiah 25:1-9

That's a prophecy from the 25th chapter of Isaiah, and it was one of the alternative readings for today. You notice in this prophecy it doesn't say anything about God being concerned about this group or that group; it says "I am concerned about all peoples." It doesn't say God will deliver some; it says the tears will be wiped away from all faces. The focus of God's concern is the reign of death over all the peoples of the earth. But it does not seem to be talking primarily about physical death. Death seems to be a metaphor for the reign of some great sadness, some great sense of shame. It says that God's salvation is about bringing an end to the reign of this kind of death, comforting the sad, and no longer being ashamed. Somehow all this will happen through, what it calls, a great feast.

It is a very powerful image. It's a passage we often hear at funerals to give us hope that after physical death we and those we love may encounter abundant life. That's important to me, but it can lead us to miss the fact that Jesus clearly understood it to be talking about a feast that was to happen here and now among the living on the earth.

One of the ways Jesus sought to communicate spiritual truth was through telling stories. Our gospels are full of his stories, though I suspect what we have in our gospels is not the stories themselves, but the briefest outline of the stories. That is, I suspect, that what we hear in ten sentences is probably an outline of a story that Jesus would take hours to tell. The stories were meant to be provocative, to make people dig deep and think and struggle with what they were pointing toward. It says in our gospels that Jesus didn't interpret the stories for people. It's unfortunate, I think, that our gospel writers often do interpret them for us, as I think that robs them of some of the immediacy and power that would come from our wrestling with what they mean. This seems particularly true in Matthew's case, for his very traditionally pious interpretations often seem really at odds with the way Jesus presented himself.

Another thing that makes it difficult for us is to hear these stories is that--while Jesus clearly expected people to be adults who struggled with the truth of their own experience--we've been told that God wants us to be like slaves, or obedient children, and, if we are not, God may send us to hell. This kind of takes all the fun out of the stories, particularly the horror stories that seemed to be one of the genre of stories Jesus liked to tell. Horror stories are not everyone's favorite genre, but I think a good horror story can help you face some of your biggest fears partly by getting you to laugh at their effect on you. Like, "O My God, didn't that scare the baby Jesus right out of you!" However, this only works because we know we're being told a horror story. If we thought we were hearing or watching or reading a documentary, they wouldn't be fun at all.

In today's gospel we have a horror story about the Feast of God. At first it appears to be a pretty traditional story. The mean, murderous people who were first invited to the feast get their comeuppance, and everyone who wasn't invited at first now gets invited to the feast. It seems a nice-easy-happy ending. But then there is this twist at the end when it is discovered that one of the newly invited guests is not wearing his wedding robe, and he gets tossed out of the feast.

Now as one who more times than I can remember has worn the wrong clothes for this or that occasion-- that's a real horror story for me. It's like those dreams where you suddenly realize you are in a classroom but somehow forgot to put on your clothes. It's all about being exposed and ridiculed and humiliated. So what in the heck does such a story have to tell us about the Feast of love, the Feast at which the reign of sadness and shame is wiped away?

For myself, that wedding robe is a symbol for the Holy Spirit and the story is thus a dramatic reminder that, while all are invited to God's Feast of Love, to be actually part of it, we need the holy Spirit. There are a lot of reasons why we need the Holy Spirit to be part of the Feast of Love: we need the peace that will help us not strike out in fear against one another and to learn to share; we need the power to forgive and to heal; we need the desire to love not only our friends but even our enemies; we need the eyes to be able to see the glory--even in the midst of what may appear to be everyday life or even poverty. But today I want to focus on the Holy Spirit being necessary for us to bring our authentic selves to the feast. That is--we can't experience the reign of God, the end of death's dominion over us, as long as we are holding onto false selves--as long as we're rejecting who we are, because we've been frightened into believing there is someone else we have to be.

Last week we heard about Francis of Assisi. As a young man nothing was more terrifying or disheartening to Francis than the sight of Lepers. At the time, people with leprosy lived the life of living ghosts. Homes were inspected every month, and if someone was found to have spots on them (though such spots obviously weren't necessarily leprosy), they were immediately taken from their homes and loved ones and taken to a hospital for lepers outside the city walls, where a funeral mass was said for them, and they were sprinkled with dirt as a sign that they were now dead to the world.

You then had to walk around with clappers to warn everyone of your approach, so they could

flee. At the same time, you weren't allowed to get a cup of water for yourself for fear that you would contaminate the river or well. Leprosy can also cause the grossest of physical deformities, as it can eat away your facial features and limbs. Francis was totally terrified by even the sight of lepers. But a key part of Francis' conversion was when he realized that these were his sisters and brothers, and he was to love them. So one day, when he saw a person with leprosy, he rode after him, leaped from his horse, and went running after him to kiss him. That embrace was transformative of Francis. Indeed, the story is that the leper immediately disappeared after that kiss, leaving Francis to conclude he had really kissed Jesus, apparently not considering the possibility that that poor person might have fled in terror, having been chased and kissed by a total stranger! But the power and truth of this action for me is that we all have an inner leper who we're tempted to reject and flee from, and yet, until we are willing to embrace that inner leper, we will remain under the rule of fear in such a way that we can't enter the Feast of the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit that gives us the power to embrace those parts of ourselves that we would otherwise disown, disassociate ourselves from, flee from, because of how repulsive and fearful they seem to us.

It's not that claiming our whole selves is the end of the journey. No--that's just another stage on the journey of being transformed, healed, and growing in glory. It's just that until we claim our whole selves, we can't really begin to experience that transformative power. So much of our suffering, our loneliness, our isolation, our sense of shame, our powerlessness, is caused by our holding onto to believing that, in order to be acceptable, we need to be someone other than who we are, which leaves us standing on illusion and subject to the reign of fear and shame and isolation.

This brings me to the other kind of feast that life can be--that our lives can be--the kind of feast we hear about in our lesson from Exodus--the feast of the idols. This is the feast where, because we are afraid, we create things, idols, that we think will help us not to feel afraid. Moses is gone. His God is invisible, intangible. Feeling vulnerable and afraid, the people want some-thing to worship, to hold onto. Normally, it's about money and/or power and/or status. Those are the things that seem to promise to make us feel invulnerable. And yet--while on the surface the Feast of the idols may appear to be a wonderful party--beneath the surface, it is the opposite. Go see the movie "American Teenager", or talk with a 7th or 8th grader about what this kind of fun means. On the surface, it all appears to be about funny putdowns, but beneath the surface, it is really about a brutal pecking order which leaves everyone afraid and ready to betray each other and in which those at the bottom are denied any real dignity or honor. Go into any community where there is something you need in order to be respected, and see what happens when you don't have that thing, or lose that thing,--a masculinist society where you aren't athletic or become handicapped, a materialist society where you don't have money or lose your job or wealth. It goes on and on, so many ways human beings are transformed into rats by buying into a rat race in pursuit of something that promises to deliver us from our vulnerable humanity.

Lastly, given that it is Columbus Day tomorrow, I want to say one last thing about God's feast of love versus the Feast of the idols, and that is, that in talking about God's feast of love versus the Feast of the idols, we are not talking about one religion versus another. Columbus got it perfectly wrong when he thought it was about Christianity versus the religions of the indigenous peoples. Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha didn't see themselves as starting new religions. They saw themselves as helping people practice true spirituality, faith, or consciousness, as opposed to false spirituality, faith, or consciousness. For decades after Jesus' death early Christians simply saw themselves as Jews who followed what they called "The Way": the way Jesus had taught about how to live, practice your faith, practice truth, practice love, etc. While it may have made sense that, at the point at which many who practiced this way weren't Jewish--they would come to call themselves Christians-- it has also had a somewhat disastrous result, because it made it seem like the issue was one religion versus another as opposed to practicing truth, justice, kindness, the holy spirit --whatever your religion.

And here I want to come back to Francis, who lived in a time when the church was at the peak of its power and glory: huge armies, huge wealth, building huge Cathedrals, able to mobilize large armies of people to do its will. Yet in the midst of all that, Francis hears God say to him: "Francis, my church is in ruins, rebuild my church." Francis didn't start a new religion. He didn't disown Christianity because in the name of Christianity tens of thousands were being murdered and tortured. That would have been easy and understandable. Rather, he heard God say, "these--your--people--are in ruins--save them". In the midst of world and church that worshipped military power, Francis launched a movement that drew hundreds of thousands who were committed to non-violence, depriving the church and kings of soldiers. In the midst of a church and world that worshipped wealth, Francis and his followers rejected wealth and embraced the poor of the earth. In the midst of a world and church that were all about status, Francis sought to be one of the least. And through that movement, for a moment in time, millions experienced something of the reign of God on earth, something of the feast of love, something of life beyond the pecking order and the rat race, something of the glory that is the gift of being a vulnerable human being, one cursed and blessed by living with a heart that wants to love and be loved.

Come out of your graves, oh my people.
Why live in darkness and sadness?
Claim who you are, and come into the light.
Don't live in terror and shame any more.
You are my beloved.
Help unbind my people and set them free. Amen.