

Joy  
17 Pentecost, Year A  
October 9, 2011  
Matthew 22:1-14, Phil 4:1-0, Ex 32:1-14

The lessons today are all over the place. We have rebellion in Exodus, a wedding banquet that no one wants to attend in the Gospel and Paul seemingly off on some mental trip singing, “Don’t worry, be happy.” Well, obviously it isn’t as simple as all that. Hopefully at the end of this sermon we can see a deeper meaning behind it all as well as some hope that can carry us forward in our day to day living.

In Exodus, Moses is up on the mountain communing with God and receiving the Ten Commandments. It is taking awhile and the Israelites at the bottom of Mt. Sinai are getting anxious. They don’t recognize that it was God who freed them from Egypt, but they thought it was Moses and now their leader is gone and they do not know what happened to him. So to calm their fears, Aaron builds a golden calf and tells everyone to prepare a feast for Yahweh – for God. The calf isn’t replacing God – it’s replacing Moses; however, they are still challenging God’s authority. God is not pleased and again threatens to destroy the people. Moses, like Abraham before him, intercedes. God listens and changes his mind. This story isn’t so much about changing the mind of an omniscient, almighty God as it is about the relationship between this omniscient, almighty God and his beloved creation – mankind. This is a new concept – that one can have this relationship with God; a relationship that allows mankind and God to work out the problem together. As Christians, our intercessor is God – in the person of Jesus. And through Jesus we too get to work out our problems together.

In today’s Gospel, Matthew is telling a story about a king getting ready for a wedding banquet. This parable is not an easy one to listen to – there is rejection, retribution, violence. It is even more difficult to try and find some words of encouragement from it, some practical lesson on which to take home and ponder.

So to understand this parable we will need to look at what Matthew is trying to say to the new church in the late first century. He is writing to a Jewish audience after the temple has been destroyed – this is after 70 AD. Matthew is addressing the Jews who are trying to figure out how they are going to worship God now that the temple is gone, now that Jesus is also gone. Matthew is trying to build a church in the midst of Roman empirical rule that is getting worse and worse.

This is simply a metaphor of disobedience and divine retribution that seeks to explain an equally unsettling reality in the larger scriptural story, namely the rejection of Jesus by some of his fellow Israelites – especially the chief priests and the elders; the same chief priests and elders that we saw last week in the parable of the Vineyard. And as we know, Jesus was rejected because he wasn’t fitting the pattern of the Messiah they were expecting.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet is about a King wanting to celebrate his son’s wedding by throwing the traditional and extravagant banquet. Normally, getting an invitation from the king is an invitation one does not turn down – especially in a culture that seeks after the acknowledgement and recognition

of those in power. But this king is not having any luck and his invitation is refused, not once, but twice. Finally he brings in anyone he can find, both good and bad, to come to the banquet. The former invitees were rejected and the ordinary people of the streets are included. The banquet goes on!

In this parable, Matthew isn't just relating God's judgment upon Israel's late first-century leadership (those who refused to come to the banquet), but he is also showing his audience that the Christian church isn't replacing Judaism, but in actuality, the church is an extension of, and renewal of, the people of Israel. Because the ones the king did find were not from another country – but from the nearby streets. This reflects Jesus love of reaching out to the outcasts of society – the lepers, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

God's faithfulness to Israel is central to Matthew's Gospel. The celebration of the Son, depicted in the fact that this banquet will go on, no matter what, marks the fullest expression of that faithfulness. The wedding banquet does occur. The king does not let a minor rebellion interfere with his love for the Son and his hospitality toward his subjects.

The scripture that sums it all up today is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul is in prison towards the end of his ministry writing to the church in Philippi to encourage them. He is giving them, and us, valuable advice on how to continue even in the face of difficult times. Paul's in prison not certain of achieving his freedom any time soon, but he gets absolute joy thinking about the church in Philippi. He exhorts them to not be anxious – not to worry about anything. Indeed he says Rejoice in the Lord always! Rejoice, no matter what!! Paul is filled with God's peace which surpasses all understanding.

Paul's words echo those of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where five times he tells his followers "Don't worry about your life." Don't worry about food. Don't worry about clothes. Don't worry about money or the morrow. Don't worry about anything at all, for God knows what you need. Who doesn't long to live like that — free of anxiety and full of joy? It's easier said than done, but possible nonetheless.

Some of our anxieties stem from an exaggerated sense of responsibility for things over which we have no control, like redirecting a river or instructing the sun. We also worry about the past we can't change, about things done and undone. Some worries are more concrete – like loss of a job, difficulties our children are experiencing.

The presence of joy does not require the absence of fears or the absence of difficulties. The apostle Paul admitted to his "conflicts without and fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:5). Nor does joy require favorable circumstances — a bigger house, a better car. We all know rich people who are miserable and poor people who radiate equanimity, dignity, and joy. This counter intuitive reality, which is so evident when you travel in the third world, is one of the many gifts that the rich can receive from the poor. Fr. Ken mentioned that one of the things he noticed in Western Tanzania was the abundant joy he saw in the

people in the midst of their poverty. Why are these people, in such abysmal circumstances, so joyful? And why am I, so privileged, agitated and empty?

It's simple – for those who put their absolute trust in God – there is peace and in that peace comes joy. It is like riding a horse and giving up the reins to God. I remember a time when I had to give up control, or I was not going to be a nice person. Rod worked for a major semiconductor company up in Oregon. Many, many years ago Rod's division was being shut down and instead of laying people off at that time, the employees went into a redeployment pool. They had some time to find a job within the company before they would be let go. I was anxious. Rod was not because he already had this sense that this could be a new adventure. Each night I would ask him – any luck? What are you doing to find a job, etc etc. I was a pest. Finally I recognized that this was not good, I did not like who I was becoming. So I sat down and said – okay God, I am giving this to you. It was miraculous. There was a sense of peace even though I did not know how his employment situation was going to work out. Friends at church were worried about us, because this was dragging on for a couple of months. We'd tell them we were at peace and they thought we were in denial. It did work out, it took until the last minute, but it did work out.

We don't often recommend that we memorize bible verses in the Episcopal Church, mostly because of the way that it has been abused. I will memorize it if it helps me stay focused on God. So here is one that I recommend you memorize or remember where to find it. It is about the fruits of the spirit - You can pull out your insert now. You will see a grapevine – Fr. Ken reminded us we are the vineyard. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches (Jn 15:5). At the bottom of the vine you can list the scripture verse – it is Galatians 5:22 which tells us what are the fruits of the spirit: You can list them on the other lines: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Holy Spirit lately has had me focus on joy. Often when I am praying for people, at the prayer service or here at the altar I have found myself praying for joy. I think we are missing joy these days. There is a lot going on in the world, financially, in natural disasters, and in unemployment. You can tell you have taken back the reins when you do not feel the love, joy, peace, etc. We need to capture the joy again.

The Israelites in the wilderness were anxious and impatient and did not have faith in Moses or God for that matter and they ended up creating a mess. The chief priests and elders during the time of Jesus were also faithless. Neither group trusted in God and so gone was their joy. Paul, who had been whipped, beaten, imprisoned several times, knew Jesus, and experienced the Peace which passes all understanding and joy. He trusted in Jesus.

We are the vineyard that produces fruits to benefit the lives of others and our own life. One of the questions we always ask – is this God's will, am I doing what God wants me to do? The answer is this: do you see the fruits of the spirit in your own life? Even in the midst of difficult times – is there that peace which passes all understanding? Do you see joy in even the smallest amount? Is there love, kindness, gentleness, patience, goodness? Are you faithful? And is there self control?

Take this insert and put this on your refrigerator or mirror. Maybe it will remind you to look for the fruits of the Spirit, and if you see them, you can be at peace because God has the reigns and he will not disappoint.