

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

Pentecost 20

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OK, for all those folks who say they don't like the Old Testament because it is too violent, have they read today's Gospel?

The king gives a wedding banquet for his son. He sends his servants to invite people, and they respond, Not only am I not going to your stupid wedding, I'm going to beat you up and kill you! Really, could they not have just said, no thanks?

The king responds to the violence of these ungrateful extreme party poopers with his own violence. He kills the offenders and burns their city. Then the king invites others to the party. We would think all would be well, but then the king picks on a poor guy at the wedding banquet who is not dressed appropriately. He ties up this guest and throws him into the outer darkness!

I mean, this is worse than a reality show! It is a Gospel horror movie.

We can interpret this parable in a certain way, that Jesus or maybe Gospel-writer Matthew seems to be implying, but it doesn't make the story much better.

The king is God. He sends his servants, the prophets. The people don't like the message, and they make fun of the prophets and kill them. So God lets Israel be occupied by the Romans, who oppress and kill many of them, and eventually destroy the city of Jerusalem. God, vindicated, goes back to his kingdom but finds one person not dressing properly. That person does not recognize Jesus as God's son. This stubborn holdout is thrown out of the party, forever.

Now, this reading seems to make sense, but does it make us feel good about Jesus? Does it make us feel good about God? Doesn't this God sound even more petty than God as depicted in our Exodus reading, who is ready to kill all the people over the golden calf incident? At least in that story, Moses is able to talk God out of his murderous impulses. In Jesus' parable, there is no second chance for the party refusers who kill the messengers. There is no second chance for the poor guy with no robe. And Jesus, our loving savior Jesus, seems to be endorsing it all.

Although this reading is a valid one, it feels like it is missing something. And it can lead to ideas that are troubling. Such as the idea that a so-called Christian nation has every right, maybe a God-ordained right, to overpower and subdue a non-Christian nation. After all, that nation would be only trying to save the other nation from eternal damnation. As we celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day this week, we know very well the results of this kind of thinking.

Even if we do not go so far as to interpret this parable in a way that leads to colonialization, genocide, and the erasure of cultures, it feels problematic. It seems to invoke a God of consequences and punishments. If we don't worship properly when commanded, if we aren't professing Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we will be destroyed, we will be sent to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Repent, and be saved, people. Come to the wedding banquet, now, and dress appropriately.

The thing is, this is a party. This is a feast. And yet thinking about it in this punitive way, it doesn't sound very fun, it doesn't sound very inviting, very party-like.

What if we stepped back a bit. What if we thought of this parable as less of a bad behavior and consequences tale, and more of a story of the natural results of our behavior, here and now? What if we thought about the ways we push away God's invitations and how that hurts us, not because of some smiting by God, but because of how it destroys us inside? What if we realized that the wedding banquet, God's kingdom, is a thing happening right here and now, that God is calling us to all the time?

This way of reading the text feels very alive to me this day, because it is National Coming Out Day. For me, as for many LGBTQ people, coming out has not been a one-time thing but a process, a process of understanding who I am and a process of showing others that reality. It is a choice, a choice I make every time I meet someone new. It is a choice to say yes to myself, to not deny myself and to not deny my wife and family. It is a choice for wholeness, for authenticity and truth.

Coming out for me has not been without cost. At many points I could have said no to God's invitation to be who I am. I could have said, I need to build my career. I could have said, I need to be safe, to be liked, to fit in. I could have gone to my farm or business and violently pushed away the messages I received.

Or I could have joined the party, but only a little bit. I could have come into the banquet but hidden myself, refused to put on that rainbow robe and hoped no one would notice I wasn't dressed for the

party. And there were times I did just that, tried to blend in in the room, all the while feeling false, feeling like I was outside in the dark even though I was inside.

The thing is, coming out as gay led me to Alleyne, to finding my life partner and making a family with her. Listening to that inner voice helped me to hear God's voice and to eventually follow God's call to ministry. Taking the risk to accept God's invitation, over and over, has brought me more and more into the banquet, more and more into a feeling of community and connection and participation in the creation of God's kingdom.

St Martin's, look around you at this wedding banquet. Everyone has on a robe, and the robes are all different styles and colors. We are gay and trans and straight, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and white, we come from many places and believe many things. God wants us to wear our robes proudly, to show all our colors.

God is inviting us all, right now, to look up from our immediate work and see a bigger picture of God's purpose for us. God is calling us to live into our truest selves, our fullest identities, to celebrate others in their fullest selves. St Martin's, come out of your closet and decolonize your mind. Put on your robe. Help your neighbor put on theirs. Join this big, beautiful party, God's party. Amen.