

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 11, 2020

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

IS 25:6-10A; PHIL 4:12-14, 19-20; MT 22:1-14 OR 22:1-10

I got sort of stuck in the first verse of the gospel: “Jesus again *in reply* spoke to them in parables.” We then hear the story of the wedding feast. But I first wanted to know what he was replying to, and to whom.

Our gospel is the first section of Matthew 22, but to get my answers, I had to go back to chapter 21. That chapter begins with the entry into Jerusalem – think the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday – which is immediately followed by the cleansing of the Temple. After spending the night in Bethany (briefly pausing on the way to curse a fig tree, and promising the disciples that same power and more), Jesus returns to Jerusalem and the Temple. There the chief priests ask him two questions: “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

We can hear them, right? None of us would like having our legitimate authority usurped. But that’s what’s happening. Jesus has been teaching and healing for years now, and the crowds are calling him a prophet and more. His at-home-ness in the Temple is palpable, and people are starting to pay real attention to his stories about privilege that is taken away from those who have it. The scribes and elders are anxious and defensive, and basically say, “Where do you get off?”

In answer to that question, Jesus tells three stories: the parable of the two sons which we heard two Sundays ago; the parable of the tenants which we considered last Sunday; and today we have the parable of the wedding feast.

So, I spent some time trying to figure out what this story teaches about authority. It’s not so simple, and I’m so not done trying to figure it out.

At first glance, though, it is really simple, and it is really dark. The authority in this story seems to come from political power – the protagonist is, after all, a king – and a king who’s willing to do some pretty drastic things in answer to those who say “No” to him. Not up for a banquet? He will destroy you and burn your city. Not concerned about finding the right thing to wear? He’ll have his henchmen bind your hands and feet and throw you into darkness filled with wailing and teeth-gnashing.

That doesn’t sound like Jesus, though. As parables are wont to do, we are forced to take another look. If this story isn’t meant to teach that authority resides in tyranny and brute force, then what? What can we glean about this king from what happens in the passage?

He is invitational, and persistently so. He *really* wants people to come to the banquet. He’s not deterred by refusals or excuses – or even by violence against those close to him. It’s a feast so important that he will do anything he can think of to fill the hall.

The king is relational. When he finally has guests in all the chairs, he doesn’t just take his own seat and commence with eating and drinking. He works the room, greeting the guests, and

that's when he sees the man who is not in proper wedding attire. So he asks him, "My friend, how is it that you come in here without a wedding garment?" He gives him a chance to explain – I don't have one, I didn't have time, I was too hungry. It's only when the guy says nothing – because there is no good answer -- that the king kicks him to the curb. The king wants the guests there so much that he's willing to pay attention and engage in conversation, but he is not willing to put up with guests who won't do the same.

What this brought to mind was my class on Matthew with Richard Dillon that I've talked about before from this ambo. I remembered him talking about Jesus' authority, so I dug out my old class notes to see if they could help me figure this out. And sure, enough I did find a couple of pages on authority, but it was in relation to Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes: dang! But I was also reminded about what Dillon drilled into us that summer: how the gospel of Matthew is all about radical obedience and radical grace.

Indeed, the king in this story is demanding. He exercises his kingly prerogative, and he expects people to cooperate. Drop what you're doing; come to the feast; come thoughtfully and ready to be here for real. It is radical obedience he wants.

But radical grace is present as well. It is a feast that is "fit for a king" to which all are invited, "bad and good alike." There is nothing to do to earn an invitation except being there to be found. The rich food and choice wine is provided.

The other place I get stuck in the story is at the end. I keep imagining that moment of silence between the king's question – "My friend, how is it that you have come in here without a wedding garment?" – and the call to the rope-armed attendants. It's one of those moments where expectation hangs in the air. It's a moment that all of us know from waking up every morning. What will my response be? Am I ready? Do I even want to be invited in? Is this authority that I'm willing to rearrange my plans for? I don't know about you, but my answers vary.

And I am struck that I'm standing here talking about authority on the day after Mary Ann's funeral. Mary Ann – who possessed a natural sense of authority, perhaps from being the first-born of so many siblings but who also possessed aptitudes which kept landing her in positions of authority throughout her life. She, like the king in our story, was invitational and relational.

May we, like her, use our time well to come up with our answer to the invitation.