

October 15, 2023 20th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

(SALT's Commentary posted 10-9-23: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/5/playing-with-fire-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>, with reference to MLK's I Have Decided to Stick with Love. Liz Loeb's Facebook post on 10-8-23.)

God's Table is Wider

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Our gospel reading, you heard it ... is a doozy.

In a week of news of so much violence, so much grief and pain and terror,
especially in the Holy Land,

I find this parable—with its own violence and terror—hard to bear.

I'll say a bit more about it, but for now I'd like to draw us to some of the other readings.

In that spirit, let's begin by dreaming first about banquets, and imagining dinner tables.

In these heavy times, let's ponder bounty, and God's wide invitation to the table.

At the end of the summer, with the first day of school nearly upon us,

we enjoyed an impromptu Sunday evening dinner with neighborhood friends.

There were giggling 9-year-olds running in and out of the house.

There was a teenager, curious but trying desperately not to show it,

We adults delighted in catching up, for the summer was full and we hadn't nearly enough time to connect.

We reviewed vacations and updated on life.

Then my good friend Kristen, her phone in hand, showed me pictures of a wedding she'd attended.

It was the wedding of relatives who live in Belgium and it took place in Belgium.

At first, she'd assumed she couldn't make it: too far, too much, how could she?

And then, at the last minute, she'd realized: for them and for herself, how could she not?

It was small and intimate, in the back yard of the couple's home,

A moving ceremony, honest talk, sacred vows, tears and laughter.

Tables set outdoors with tablecloths flapping gently in the soft evening breeze.

Twinkle lights, flowers from the garden, plates of good food.

It was a turning point for Kristen, a reminder of her people and her connection to them,

a nourishing beyond what she'd expected,

a touchstone to which she keeps looking back, as she looks forward.

Dear ones, imagine a dinner table that is important for you?

What does it look like?

Who is around that table?

What sights and sounds, and tastes does this conjure?

Why is it precious to you?

Feasts and tables show up in many of our readings this morning.

The reading from Isaiah begins with its own share of violence:

The city is a heap.

Rebuilding seems out of the question.

The noise and smoke and heat, they rage...

And then Isaiah writes, dreaming forward: "On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine."

"And death will be swallowed up forever, then God will wipe away the tears from all faces."

We didn't yet read our psalm, Psalm 23.

Instead, we can join the choir in singing a version of it at the offertory.

"The Lord is my shepherd," familiar words.

And then toward the end: "You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies."

What does it feel like to eat in the safety of the shepherd, fully aware that enemies are close?

In our Epistle reading, Paul writes from a Roman prison to the people of Philippi.

This passage doesn't include a dinner table.

But it does have treasured verses that are set in a space of strife and conflict.

Today's passage mentions (by name I'd add) two women: Euodia and Syntyche.

This is their only mention in the whole Bible: Say their names: Euodia and Syntyche.

Google them and you'll notice how they are disparaged by some as "Quarrelsome women."

I'd lean the other way and celebrate their leadership:

enough leadership that maybe they don't see eye to eye,

that they are human, and smart, and care, and have opinions, and thoughts and values.

Amidst this, Paul writes: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.

And then: "The peace of God which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

And finally: “Keep on doing the things you have receive and heard and seen.”

Treasured lines, penned from prison, to a people who know a thing or two about strife and hardship.

Dear ones, what I notice today, the gospel that’s preaching to me, is this:

God keeps calling us to the table.

In the shadows of death,

in the presence of enemies,

during times of tension,

when the expected guests don’t show up,

over and over again, Christ sets the table,

invites us ‘round,

makes a way in the discomfort,

feeds and nourishes the good and the bad, all of us in between,

God gathers us in, softens hearts, and opens minds.

This morning we celebrate our Bread ministry here at Hope.

I remember the beginnings of this ministry,

when people like John Bablitch and Bryan Kufus,

one of our saints Wayne Westwood,

and John Pignatello and Mateo each pulled me aside:

“I’ve been thinking about a bread oven.”

“I’ve been dreaming about baking bread as a church, as an outreach, a witness.”

“I notice that bread is so important to our faith—could we start something?”

God keeps calling us to the table, keeps calling us to the bread.

Friends, the violence and bloodshed in the Holy Land is heartbreaking, tragic, .

The world already felt heavy and somehow this has heightened the challenges before us,

weighing many of us with concern, with grief, with fear.

As a kid my mom would remind me: “Hurt people hurt people.”

In more recent years that’s been attributed to plenty of good souls,

but my mom’s wisdom stands: Hurt people hurt people.

4th grade bullying.

Lawmakers trash talking their political opponents.

The complicated history of the middle east, really the world, from ancient days to now.

Generational trauma.

On all side, in all ways, hurt people hurt people.

God's invitation to the table, indeed the wedding banquet, is big, and wide, and extravagant,

and in the parable, it's to everyone, "all whom they found, both good and bad."

Dear ones, in these times of anxiety and violence,

when it feels like the world is falling down around us,

the temptation is to divide the world into good and into bad.

"But God's grace calls us, even as we ... condemn specific acts, to refuse that kind of divisiveness." (SALT)

Dr. King once said, "I'm not talking about 'emotional bosh' when I talk about love;

I'm talking about a strong, demanding love."

Come back to the banquet table of peace.

Make a way to live together.

This path is difficult and, at once, indispensable. (SALT)

Liz Loeb is a lawyer and colleague in the movement:

She's Associate Director at Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light,

and has been involved at the intersection of movements around

race and climate, gay marriage and more.

Liz is Jewish and a member of Shir Tikvah Synagogue in southwest Minneapolis.

She wrote a compelling piece this week, noting the way people

are tempted to take sides, either side, to try and justify what is happening, to shore up support.

We've heard it: law makers, writers of letters to the editor, pundits, religious folks.

Liz Loeb writes,

"I refuse to believe that as people who ground ourselves in interdependence, in interconnectedness,

that this is somehow the world of liberation of which we've been dreaming."

Dear ones, beloved ones, I am dreaming of this world of liberation.

And, I, too, refuse to believe this is it.

God's vision is bigger, God's table is wider.

In these tragic times, we can be more than this:

More human. More loving. More graceful.

More interdependent. May it be so. Amen.