Homily for Proper 23A

S. Stephen’s, Providence

October 11, 2020

‘The wedding is ready … Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Everyone loves a good party.

I can think back on several occasions – birthday parties usually,

and the weddings of dear friends –

and I can still remember certain moments.

They’re seared into my mind.

Banquets, and especially weddings,

are about so much more than the food of course, and the cake –

and they’re about more than the dress.

It’s about the love of two people, the joining of families,

and the creation of something new –

the fulfillment of something,

which shows the abundance of love manifested in our lives.

Is it any wonder then that weddings and banquets

are used so much throughout scripture to signify or foretell

what God will ultimately do?

… to convey what our ultimate hope in God will be like?

… to convey God’s abundance?

In Isaiah, we heard today one of my favorite passages.

Isaiah is foretelling the day of the Lord,

when he will come and save his people from every disgrace,

every tear and every want.

Death will be swallowed up for ever.

If you noticed,

he also describes a feast of rich food and well-aged wines:

food rich with marrow and well-aged wines strained clear.

If that’s a foretaste of heaven, well then, sign me up!

I do hope there’s a decent Barolo or Sangiovese,

and a veal risotto, or a nice brisket.

But now I’m straying from the point.

I suppose it’s safe to say that the promise of a day where there is rich food

in overflowing abundance

conveyed a great promise to a people

in a largely agrarian culture,

working hard to make the land yield its fruits,

and in which abundance of food wasn’t always a guaranteed thing.

For the time in which Isaiah is writing,

the people are in exile in Babylon,

and perhaps we may assume that feasting was not something

they enjoyed often.

In our Psalm – that very familiar 23rd psalm –

we hear again overtones of the banquet God will prepare

in order to provide for us.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.”

All is pure delight.

That is until we arrive at our Gospel reading today.

This party – this wedding banquet – takes a terrible wrong turn.

All is not sweetness and light.

And this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, we are told!

A king is throwing a wedding feast for his son.

Those who are invited not only ignore the invitation,

but mistreat and even kill some of the servants sent by the King

to remind them of their invitation.

(This was how things were done before online systems like Eventbrite,

you see.)

The enraged king responds by sending his army to destroy the town

which snubbed his invitation, and kill all the inhabitants.

He still has a party to throw, however,

and so he sends out more servants into the main streets,

telling them to invite any and all,

since the first guests were found not worthy of the occasion.

And it works! The hall is packed, and everyone has a good time.

However, despite the free for all nature of the invitation,

there appears to be a Wedding Crasher at this banquet:

someone who is just there to take advantage of all the free stuff,

but doesn’t appreciate the significance of the occasion.

Clearly very frustrated at this guest’s lack of respect or civility,

the king has him bound and cast out into the abyss of darkness.

And our parable ends with the ominous words of Jesus,

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

There is a lot to unpack in this parable,

but I have three main points to make.

Point Number One:

Anyone may come to the feast that God has prepared.

Yes, anyone.

This seems at odds with the end of the parable,

but it is clear that the initial invitation is cast wide and far,

to any with ears to listen and hear it!

This parable is the third in a series of judgments

that Jesus has been pronouncing against the Temple establishment.

The destruction of the city in the parable

is very likely an allusion to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

in the year 70.

The community of believers for which Matthew is writing

is trying to make sense of this terrible event.

As they came to understand it,

the invitation has been rescinded from the first invitees,

who, like those in the parable,

mistreated the prophets, even killing some,

and so God has reached out to a new people.

As Fr. Pearson pointed out last week,

it is difficult to hear and talk about these passages

without our ears hearing undertones of antisemitism.

I don’t think that is what was intended in this most Jewish of Gospels –

rather, Matthew speaks to the great divisions and pain

which have arisen from this emerging community’s

separation from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Like we see in the Book of Acts,

the newly forming Church is realizing that God’s invitation

extends beyond Israel and to all the world.

The invitation is for everyone – literally anyone.

Salvation is not based upon conditions of race or ethnicity,

wealth or status,

income bracket, education, athletic ability, or attractiveness,

or age or gender or political affiliation.

But though the gates are open wide,

the kingdom still has gates and we must enter through them,

which brings me to my second point:

There are conditions attached.

You recall the poor wedding crasher who didn’t show up appropriately dressed?

A bit like showing up to a wedding or a funeral in a t-shirt and flip flops,

obnoxiously piling one’s plate full of shrimp cocktail

and crab cakes and cream puffs,

while not even attempting to talk to the other guests.

The invitation to this particular banquet is supposed to change us.

God’s grace which enables us to partake of the banquet

and accept the invitation,

should start to shine through us.

In other words, we should be bearing the fruits of our faith.

For Matthew, the religiosity of the Jewish establishment

had stopped bearing fruit.

God was looking for a faith and religious practice

which yielded good fruit.

St. Paul tells us the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

gentleness, and self control.

Jesus has a good deal to say about how we live our lives,

and even more to say about how we treat others.

The way we love our neighbor shows how we love God.

That is the condition imposed by the kingdom,

and it shows.

In other words, that righteousness and love become our wedding garment,

as we become clothed with the love of God in Christ.

A bitter and unforgiving heart,

a selfish mind, or a mouth which sows division

are as much out of line for the Christian

as the flip-flop, t-shirt wearing wedding crasher.

Finally, and we must not miss this point –

the kingdom of God is a feast.

And we should act like it.

God means to be enjoyed.

As one commenter on today’s readings said,

“He is the God of laughter, full bellies, and second helpings.”

Every Eucharist, every Mass, is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

I realize right now that we have the wine withheld,

but the fullness of God’s overflowing love and abundant grace

is still there in that sacrament.

Life in God is a life of abundance.

This does not mean that a life in God equates material abundance.

That is called financial prosperity.

Rather our notion of abundance perhaps needs to be rethought.

It means resting in the knowledge of God’s love for one’s self,

so that you may in turn reach out to others and give of yourself.

That means in love and word and deed.

In our life in Christ, we are free to give of ourselves abundantly,

because of the abundance we have discovered in God.

We are called to reflect what we have received from God

in what we offer back to others.

In a way, when we pledge, or commit to supporting the work

of S. Stephen’s or any other parish in a specific way,

it is a way of saying

“I’ve come to appreciate the significance of God’s invitation –

I’ve seen how this particular invitation has changed me –

and I want to participate more fully in this life of abundance.”

We give abundantly as we are called to love abundantly.

In this stewardship season, we are called to be good stewards –

stewards of God’s abundance,

and stewards of this particular corner of God’s kingdom,

known as S. Stephen’s.

When we are good stewards,

it ensures that this place

and its particular mission

will be there and going strong for others –

those who have not yet heard God’s call to the party – the banquet.

So please consider how you might be a good steward

of this abundance.

Meanwhile, there’s a party to enjoy – this life of abundance –

a life full of love and joy.

It’s been promised to us.

Do you believe it?

Then come … come to the party.

There’s a seat with your name on it.

Amen.