TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Ruining Dinner* Matthew 22:1-14

Let me begin this morning’s sermon by confessing that the title, *Ruining Dinner*, is something I “borrowed” from a podcast which I listen to on occasion.

For those of you who do not frequent the online world of lectures and other entertainments: a podcast is a recorded conversation or monologue that can be listened to on your computer or smart phone. There are thousands of them every week on thousands and thousands of subjects.

The ones I tend to gravitate toward are theological in nature—like the one that has the same name as this sermon. I took it for this sermon for rather obvious reasons—the Scripture we just heard is filled with the image of dinner, a wedding dinner, to be precise. Through a parable, Jesus tells his listeners about a banquet to celebrate the wedding of a king’s son…and of the way in which the celebration, the dinner, was ruined.

I listen to the podcast, Ruining Dinner, because I like how the podcast personalities, Diane Butler Bass and the Rev. Trip Fuller, have come to believe that we should resist our natural aversion to conflict when it comes to the destruction of peace and people—the likes of which we have see every day all around us, but especially this past week in Israel-Palestine.

Butler Bass and Fuller believe we should risk being uncomfortable when it comes to speaking-up for peace—especially in the face of so much desire for retribution and revenge. While avoiding a rush to judgement, we might even risk “ruining dinner” in order to speak a word of grief and compassion for the death and destruction that is visiting so many families.

As for the fantastic image Jesus paints in his parable, take note that his description is “over the top” because he is making a very important point.

Here is what Jesus’ first listeners would have known: that such a banquet would be a sumptuously extravagant affair. Indeed, it would have been planned for and arranged with a great deal of care and thought. The cost of such a dinner would also have been considerable. This was because a wedding feast was one of the most joyous occasions in Jewish life. Therefore, the family of the groom would plan a feast that could last for up to a whole week. It was an event of major proportions.

Further, Jesus’ listeners would have known that for a king’s son, the preparations would have been even more elaborate and costly. Therefore, it is a huge understatement to say that *ruining* such an event would have been a major insult and an economic disaster for an ordinary person to bear.

For a king to be so disrespected would have been a serious affront to his stature as well as his pride. What is more, a king would have had the power and wealth to respond to the insult with the kind of large-scale assault we see in this parable. The king is insulted, but it is more than that. In truth, ignoring or making light of a *king’s* invitation is an assault to his person *and* his authority. It says that he is of little importance or value in the lives of those who snubbed him and his invitation.

Jesus drives home this point by relating to his listeners of how the second set of servants the king sends out to again entreat the guests to come to the banquet are treated with physical violence. Those who are not ignored a second time are beaten and killed.

Although it is hyperbole, in Jesus’ parable, the king responds to this violence with violence, and on a scale that is proportionate to his power and feelings of offence. Indeed, the king’s response shows how very offended he is, and how serious he is about re-asserting his power and importance—his dominance over them.

That done, it is now time to put on the wedding clothes and begin the party.

At this point in the sermon, I would like us to pause for a moment. I am not yet ready to move on to the party. I need a moment—perhaps you do, too. So, let us—together—take a moment to think about the violence that is portrayed in this passage. I, myself, find it impossible not to be reminded of the violence, the brutality that has been on our television screens for the past week. So, let us take a moment to silently mourn and pray for peace before we move on.

Amen.

We are used to such things, of course. Sadly.

However, what we have seen this week in Israel-Palestine is somehow different. In a time where violence is so commonplace around the world, this was different.

We, who are almost used to seeing the kind of “smash-and-grab” robberies that are taking place in so many cities around the country;

We who are almost immune to the newest story of a mass shooting at a mall, or a church, or a school, or a synagogue, or a mosque—

We who are used to seeing the daily violence that lives in the lives, and in the spirits, of our houseless neighbors;

—or on the faces of women whose bodies are often threatened by cultural and administrative violence legislated against them;

—or in the faces of refugees fleeing their homes and homeland in hope of safety and a future, and freedom.

Even in the presence of such as these acts of violence, the ferocity and viciousness we have seen this week has managed to wake even the most tired among us, the most burned-out of cynics. And we wonder—at least I do—at this parable Jesus told a group of listeners so long ago—when life was supposed to have been more brutal than it is today…except it is not, is it?

How can this parable be helpful to us? How can it give us any hope for *our* future—even the immediate future of the brutal conflict we have, once again, awakened to find in Israel-Palestine?

Even more important, let us ask if Jesus was making allowances for the king in his parable to respond the way he did? If so, is this the kind of justice we are to expect and in which we will be called to engage in as we follow Jesus? Shall we be instruments of the same kind of violence in his name?

For many generations, the images and the portraits of brutal judgement we find in the Bible—even in Jesus’ parables—have been the inspiration for such responses in the lives of his followers. This has been the response of many other peoples to their traditions, too. Many people throughout history have sought out justification in holy scriptures so they could authorize their crimes and murders, their greed for land and authority and control.

For those who are tempted to think that Jesus was attempting to sanction such actions I would remind you that the violence that he, himself, suffered on the cross was a once-and-for-all declaration that violence is condemned. *Violence—in all of its forms—is judged and condemned by the cross of Christ.*

Indeed, it is Jesus’ cross that demands that we take seriously the violence that persists in our lives, and the life of the world, and address it the way in which he did, with love of God. Jesus trusted and valued God’s love so deeply and so perfectly that he walked toward the cross and was crucified. Rather than ask for holy fire and destruction to save his life, or to avenge his death, Jesus showed the world how deep his own love for us was…and *is* even here and now, even today.

*This* is what is supposed to make a lasting impression on us. This is the wedding garment that we are supposed to be wearing even now, in this moment. The garment is his love and his desire that we should know and celebrate the love of God for all people.

This is the same wedding garment that the man at the end of the parable had failed to put on. He had no excuse in rejecting it, other than he did not want to respond with the gratitude that such a gesture inspires. Thankfulness might even have made him change his own ways into that of Jesus’ way of love and compassion.

Rather than ruining dinner, we are to wear the wedding garment given to us gladly and proudly, but also thoughtfully—that is: the love and righteousness God has woven into the wedding garment we have been given is to be a constant reminder of how we are to live and move in the world.

We are reminded of this throughout the Gospels, but also in the words of those who came after him like the apostle Paul. Paul’s words of advice to the church in Philippi are among the most exquisite he ever penned, especially these: *4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near…8*Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [Philippians 4:1-9]

It is of utmost importance for us to remember, especially today, that Paul wrote these words of powerful gentleness and rejoicing while he was in prison. While in the midst of that kind of violence, Paul knew and preached about what he had learned as he served Christ.

In the coming days and weeks, feelings about Israel-Palestine will be running high. The body count will rise for both sides, and there will be much condemnation for both sides. Rather than take sides, let us listen and grieve with the parents and spouses of Israelis and Palestinians. Let us listen for the elements of truth common in the history each will relate.

Let us seek out events and encounters that may present themselves—opportunities to pray with them that together, with our support, they will find a way through the violence each side is suffering. Let justice be more important than grudges, than revenge, than tribal loyalty, more than even historic abuses. Let there be a new day of clarity and commitment to life and freedom for all people.

Through the din of destruction and death, let us pray that Israelis and Palestinians will hear and experience each other’s humanity, and be transformed and gentled by it.

Most of all, let us treasure the garment of peace and generosity that we have been given. Let us give thanks for it, let us live with the love that is woven into it, and let us be ever ready to proclaim the goodness and righteousness of the love and peace it proclaims. Let it be so. Amen.