

**Pentecost 21A - Proper 23
Creation Sunday
Grace St. Paul's - 10/9/11**

It was 1969, the apex of the Age of Aquarius and free love, Vatican II and hippies, flower power and Vietnam. It was a profoundly heady, but also confusing time. The world was going two very different directions simultaneously, both at lightning speed. I was a very young, very naive high school student, being exposed for the first time to the overwhelmingness of New York City. I was there with my journalism class, but what I experienced that week went far beyond how to structure a sentence. One night we went to the Electric Circus, the country's foremost strobe flashing, psychedelic rock venue. I, of course, had no idea what an Electric Circus was, so I wore a shirt and tie to the event. I was mortified and embarrassed beyond words when I discovered not only was I the only one with dress clothes, but that most people had no clothes at all, at least on the top half of their bodies. One night later we went to Mama Leone's, at the time the most well known Italian restaurant in America. Once again, I wore a shirt and tie, only to be mortified once again, because this time I did not meet the dress code. They put a suit jacket on me that was

three sizes too big for me so that I could enter the restaurant. On two consecutive nights I was humiliated beyond belief, so much so that I can recall those awful details for you all these years later.

It is not difficult therefore, for me to relate to the poor fellow in today's Gospel who gets tossed out on his ear for not adhering to the dress code. Being thrown into the outer darkness is exactly what I felt like those many years ago. I also felt those two nights like this Gospel makes me feel today. Disturbed by its contents and embarrassed that it is in our Bible at all.

Those of you who were here last week may have already realized what is going on in this strange Gospel tale. Matthew has taken a parable of Jesus and reinterpreted it for the early church.

An earlier version of this story exists in both the Gospel of Luke and the gnostic Gospel of Thomas. In those versions, it is not a king, but just a guy preparing a wedding feast. The question in those parables is, what if you had a party and no one came? The point in those stories is that only socially accepted people were invited to anyone's feast. But in God's kingdom, EVERYONE will be welcomed to the banquet, especially the poor and the outcast. The Good News is

that the kingdom of God is a feast in which those abused and rejected by society are invited.

But in today's version, Matthew changes the moral by turning the parable into an allegory, like last week. The king (God) prepares a feast for his son (Jesus) and invites his subjects (Israel) to the banquet. They don't take the king up on the invitation and actually kill the king's servants (the prophets). The king destroys them and their city (an allusion to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD) and invites others (Gentiles) to the feast.

Then Matthew adds another piece not in the other stories, this whole thing that reminded me of the horrible events of that week in New York city. The dress code issue is apparently a reference to Christians who join the community but are unprepared, or turn out not to be fit, and so are expelled.

Here we are with three stories, obviously from the same roots, but with very different interpretations. Is one right and others wrong? Of course not. All interpret the story to speak to the issues of their own time. This is exactly what we are called to do with the story of the Wedding Banquet.

The first question that I believe needs to be asked in this process of interpretation is this. Who are the oppressed and the forgotten in today's world? Who are the ones that we never invite to the wedding banquet, the ones who we set aside as not important or not worthwhile to us? Who is being abused in our culture and who are we being called to bring to the banquet?

Unfortunately, it is not difficult identifying scores of victims of abuse and violence these days. But as the church, we have limited our vision of such violence and oppression. Unlike Matthew, we have been unable to reapply this Gospel story to our own world situation. Different than any other period in history, abuse of the voiceless is no longer confined to humanity now.

All of us have heard the raw numbers. According to the World Resources Institute, 100 species become extinct every day due to loss of habitat. 50,000 species are estimated to go extinct each year because there is no place left for them to live. Current extinction rates rival those of the five greatest mass extinctions in world history. Except today's extinctions are for the most part not a result of natural causes, but rather the encroachment of humanity.

For me, the most disconcerting part of the ecological crisis is the role religious institutions have played in allowing this to happen. Because of the way we have interpreted revelation and scripture, we have condoned the destruction of the earth, and in some ways, actually encouraged it. Passionist priest Thomas Berry, who died in 2009, described this as “a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and bestowal of all rights on the humans.”

In other words, religion has taught us that humans are separate from the rest of creation, that humans are somehow above all other forms of life, and that God put the world here for our use and abuse.

I heard this theology to the exclusion of all others as a child; in religion class, and again in high school. But it wasn't until seminary that I learned where this thought pattern originated. I found it when I studied the origins of Neo-orthodox and evangelical theology. Both of them begin with the same premise. It is simply this; God is discontinuous with the universe. God is the “holy other.” We were taught that God is “up there” somewhere and that we are “down here.” We were taught that God is totally distinct from us. And hence comes

our understanding of all the world. God is separate from us. We are made in God's image. Therefore, we are separate from the rest of creation. Just as God is above us, we are above animals and all creation. And therefore, we have the right to do with the earth whatever we please, just as God has the right to do with us whatever God pleases.

From this theology, it follows that our goal becomes to suffer through this life, so we can get to God, go to heaven, and get away from this pitiful world in which we live. What happens to this planet is immaterial, because our goal is to get with God in the good place, far, far, away. And consequently, Christianity has seen nothing in the ecological movement that had anything to do with religion.

Beloved, neo-orthodoxy was an important theological concept in its time, just like Matthew's reinterpretation of today's parable had something important to say to early Christians who were being ostracized by other parts of their Jewish community. But it is only half of the picture. And in the world we live in today, I would suggest that it is the other half of that picture that we need to be embracing right now.

Yes, of course our tradition teaches us that God is the holy other, that God is distinct from us and from creation. But it also teaches us that God is with us, that God is part of us. This is what incarnation is all about. God cared for us so much that God became part of us, God became one with us. The most important thing about incarnation though, is that this is not a once for all time experience. That is what Easter means. God did not just become present with the universe and then disappear, but the miracle of Easter is that God is still with us now. God is both completely with us and at the same time separate from us. The world is part of God and God is much larger than the world.

As much as I would like to claim it, this is not the theology of one weirdo priest wandering the deserts of southern Arizona. It is orthodox Christian theology. It is impossible to miss in our tradition and our sacred text, whether we are talking about the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Scripture. Isaiah - chapter 6- "The whole earth is FULL of God's glory." Psalm 29 - "The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness... The voice of Yahweh causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forests bare." Psalm 139 - "You have searched me and known

me;...You go before me and behind me, and lay your hand upon me...

Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.”

How does God appear in virtually every case in the Hebrew Bible? In theophanies, through nature, in the storm, in burning bushes, in the cloud, in the fire and on and on. It is also not just our Easter stories but our Christmas ones too. What is Jesus’ name? Immanuel, a Hebrew word meaning “God with us.”

The Bible makes it clear that we experience God because the world is part of God. How else could we understand Paul in the Book of Acts: For ‘In God we live and move and have our being.’ And if that is not transparent enough, hear the words from Colossians, “There is only Christ: HE IS EVERYTHING AND HE IS IN EVERYTHING.”

Beloved, the reason so many of us have had profound experiences of the divine in nature is because God is present in the natural world in a palpable way. This is how God most often chooses to be revealed to us, and though it is saturated in our tradition, most Christians still don’t buy it, they still fall back on the image of God as

transcendent, as only available to us through a conduit like this church building. I will never forget preparing to do a wedding on a beach on the east coast of America. The weather was reaching hurricane proportions and I was looking for a backup for the service if it became impossible to do it outside. I called the local Rector to ask if we could use the church if the worst occurred and she said to me, “Your first option is to have a wedding outside? Where the heck did you go to seminary? God is accessed through the church, not the ocean. No, you can’t use the church.”

Well yes, God is accessed through the church. But if she had been to the wedding that we did have on the beach, she could not have helped but notice that at the moment the couple finished their wedding vows, two dolphins jumped out of the water as if on cue. It was impossible to not know that God was in the midst of us. Thomas Berry had it exactly right. “The universe is the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of the divine.”

Now knowing full well that not only did God create this natural wonder surrounding us but that God is also in the land, the forests, the deserts, the animals, the air, the water, and the polar ice caps, how

does this affect our interpretation of today's Gospel? If they are all part of God, how could we ever allow someone to abuse them? How could we ever again build a human structure without first considering what part of creation we would be destroying in so doing? Taking this one step further, if all life is connected and all life contains God, then the plight of the animals dying in droves and the plight of the rain forests disappearing by the second is absolutely no different than the plight of the poor and the oppressed. In fact, a theology that truly lives into Jesus' call to care for those who cannot care for themselves must include the suffering of all the world, because to only respond to the human poor would be to perpetuate the situation that creates their poverty in the first place.

Beloved, the time has come to embrace a much more complete understanding of God. When we realize that God is truly with us and that everything in the world is in God, everything changes. Despite what some of our own prayers state, the earth is not a resource for human beings. It is a living, breathing organism, it is a sacred part of God. And if all things are sacred, we have no other option but to create a world where the Earth and all its creatures receive the same

message of liberty that our ancestors experienced in the Exodus.

God's presence in creation means that as Christians, there can be no more important thing for any of us to do in life than to demand that the domination systems of the world be put to an end, whether those systems are oppressive to humans or to the Earth.

I truly believe that this is the most important message of our time. It is our calling as the church. The inner life of the human depends immediately on the outer world of nature. Humans are part of the great web of life that makes up the entire cosmos. We are part of God, just as the rocks, the plants, and the animals are part of God. We are not above the web, but part of it.

As humans though, we do have a unique place in God's world. We are the only species that has been given the task by God to protect our fellow beings. Only we can protect other species who cannot protect themselves. Only we can save God's world from destruction.

It can be done. We can reverse the trend. But the change is not going to take place through grass roots groups or environmental movements. It is not going to happen because a politician says it is the right thing to do. Throughout history, the only way a change of

this magnitude has taken place is when people accept this message as one of life's ultimate meanings. This can only occur through our religions.

It is time for us to fundamentally shift the role of religion in the world today. It is time to change God's world. It is time to save God's earth. It is time for us to hear not just the cry of God's people, but also the cry of God's earth. Amen.