

For the Long Haul

The Sundays after Pentecost can seem to drag on and on at times. Throughout the long summer, we are asked to maintain our enthusiasm for faith and for worship. This is where we learn again that our faith journey is a marathon and not a sprint. Sure, we've heard that before and maybe even could say we know it. But what does it mean?

The first thing it means is that we won't get too far in our discipleship journey on enthusiasm alone. There will be times when we've hit a dry spell, or when we find ourselves in a desert. And as the examples in our chosen texts for the next four weeks show us, grumbling and fear will be ever around us and even within us at times. Enthusiasm wanes and emotions come and go. It takes discipline to sustain the pace as we walk our faith journey. It takes commitment and the will to keep putting one foot in front of another.

This is not, however, a self-generated discipline, though the self is involved. But the other truth before us is that we are not alone as we continue along our discipleship path. First of all, there is the ever-present Spirit of God who sustains and enlivens us the more we seek God in our daily lives, as we proceed on the long haul of faith. God is with us. Secondly, there is a community of faith that encourages us, mentors us, learns with us and even from us at times. We are in relationship with the church in the long haul. Indeed, we might argue that the only way we can make it for the long haul is together. There's a saying that sums it up: "if you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together." We are in community as we journey, especially for the long haul.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - The Burden of the Day

September 24, 2023

[Exodus 16:2-15](#); [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

God provides. It seems clear that this is one of the messages from our texts this week. But it would also be clear that God provides for our needs in unusual and sometimes confusing ways. Whether it is manna and quail in the desert or a surprisingly generous but perhaps somewhat unfair payment for labor, God provides in ways that give us pause and, hopefully, make us think.

We also discover, when we look at the stories as well as our own lives, that God works in partnership to meet needs. Effort is required to gather the manna that forms each morning and to capture the quail that roost in the evening. Labor in the vineyard is a part of the covenant made with God as we claim the joy of belonging to the kin-dom. We aren't passive recipients of God's grace, but engaged in the process of discovery and acceptance. God provides, we gather, and we share. We are weeks past Labor Day in the US, but we can celebrate the efforts of the church to gather and share God's bounty within the body and with the wider community as well. What manna ministry can we celebrate this week as we worship together?

There is also a hospitality issue in the gospel text. Who is welcome in our vineyard? What barriers or hierarchies get in the way of truly welcoming those who may not yet belong to the body? Do we go out of our way to include and incorporate even those who may look different from us, those who may respond differently from us? What 'rights' do longer-term members feel they hold over those who may have joined more recently?

Does it seem odd to ask these questions in a space for worship planning? Well, worship is where we set the tone for the church. Who we are together is who we are as we worship. What can we do to make sure everyone feels included in the worship experience? Is there hidden language that only insiders know? Is there incomplete information that would preclude first-timers from fully participating? Are there unspoken expectations that might cause embarrassment for those not in the know? Paying attention to how we conduct our worship is important for the flow of worship, but also as an indicator of the nature of the body that gathers.

Another theme might be "sharing the load." Who among us is carrying the "burden of the day," as some of the workers in the vineyard complained? It is hard to maintain a spirit of service and commitment when some are feeling used or unappreciated or unseen. Worship can be a way of honoring those who labor in the church as well as being an encouragement to others to spend time gathering the manna. There is joy in service, even when it is hard work.

PREACHING NOTES

Sure, let's begin this week with grumbling. Take your pick; there's plenty of it. Maybe you could survey the grumbles in the congregation to start. Everything and anything that people have complained about in the past few weeks, just lay it out there as a launching point. It's a human thing, a common, constant thing, isn't it? Grumbling, comparing, misremembering the past – making it better than it really was. Just go with it; everybody does it. Right.

Well, maybe not. No one likes to have their grumbles tossed back at them in such a public way. Better start with the text then. Take your pick: a gospel parable of grumbling and misunderstanding or a text from Exodus with real live grumbling about real-life concerns and hyperbolic whining.

The Exodus story is rife with complaints. But if we're honest, we kinda understand. Sure, we have centuries worth of hindsight to tell us they didn't need to worry, that they were cared for and protected. Sure, we can see where they went wrong, where their trust was too shaky, and their choices were less than optimum. But in their moment, it is hard not to understand their panic. They were about six weeks into the wilderness wandering, which doesn't seem so much, given that they had almost forty years to go, but it is long enough to run out of the things you managed to carry with you when you fled Egypt and to realize that the living off the land thing was better in imagination than in reality. So, of course, they were hungry and afraid and pretty sure that they had made a big mistake launching off on this journey.

Granted their complaint, at least as recorded, was a bit over the top – “if only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread...” (*Exodus 16:3 NRSV*). You know how it is, when things are bad, you look back and what was bad before doesn't seem as bad now. They were conveniently forgetting that they were slaves back there in Egypt. And here's an interesting thought: they sat by the fleshpots – which scholars tell us were big pots of simmering meat – but ate their fill of bread. So, there was meat, but they didn't get it. And yet, that memory is better than their current reality, or so they thought.

“OK,” God says, “I'll take care of it. I'll rain bread from heaven.” I'm sorry, what? Bread that rains. This is kind of unusual, wouldn't you say? There have been various attempts to describe this phenomenon from a scientific point of view. And maybe there is a rational explanation. But that's not the point here. We don't need to explain this miracle, only accept it as a sign of God's providing for those who are called. Even those being fed by it didn't understand it. While the rained-down bread doesn't get named in our text, a few verses later, we get the label. And, as we know, it is called *manna*, which translates as a question, “What is it?” This is the question that they asked when they first saw it the morning after the complaining. And that *is* in our text, v. 15, “*When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “what is it?” For they did not know what it was.*”

That means that the exodus people are now sustained and nourished by a question, “What is it?” Maybe this is an incomplete question. Maybe it should be, “What is it that God is doing?” Maybe by paying attention to what is happening around them on a regular basis, they could learn to see God at work, even when things get difficult. And they certainly will for those folks wandering in the desert. And for us too, come to think about it.

As an aside, you might note that while the whining spoke of remembering bread in the presence of meat, God decided to provide meat in addition to the bread: meat at twilight, in the form of quail that would settle within their reach, and bread in the morning, formed like dew on the ground. "What is it?" seems a perfectly logical question.

Perhaps it is an implied question in Jesus's parable from Matthew's Gospel. What is it that God is doing? The kind of economic policy and worker's compensation Jesus trots out in this parable would be cause for a violent overthrow of the government, one might think. We are quick to translate this parable out of the economic world in which it is set and make it a spiritual exchange that is somehow more palatable for us. This is about, we say, accepting new people. Realizing that when anyone joins the fellowship of believers, they become inheritors to the whole promise. Even though there are those of us who have labored long and hard for our reward, these new folks get the entire blessing, even though they haven't put in their "pew time" or church service time. And like the all-day workers in the story, we resent that generosity. We have borne the burden of the day; we have worked in the hot sun; we have endured long sermons and tedious lessons and have labored hard to walk the straight and narrow path. We should get a bigger reward, shouldn't we?

That is a proper interpretation, to be sure. And there is plenty of work for the church to be doing here. But let's not assume that Jesus was trying to change our whole monetary system at the same time. Maybe he was asking us to consider what our economics are based on and how we go about determining the worth of employees and managers both. Maybe he was really trying to turn our assumptions about the good life or about how the world ought to work upside down. This is risky talk, to be sure. The truth is, we don't like change. We'd rather just adjust to the way things are and continue to complain, of course, than work toward a change that might make things better for everyone, ourselves included.

What if we shaped our world and the way we live in it according to grace and generosity? How might that change what we do and how we do it? What might that world look like? Is it even possible? It requires a different way of measuring, of not comparing, of setting aside jealousies and envy. What is the burden of the day? How do we labor in the Lord's vineyard without feeling like we are owed something, but simply enjoying the service and the connections that it brings us? Settling in for the long haul, in this faith journey, is to acknowledge that much of what we've learned about how the world works doesn't fit us anymore. Jesus comes along and turns everything upside down. And what a glorious way to live it is. For the long haul.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Quarreled and Tested

October 1, 2023

[Exodus 17:1-7](#); [Matthew 21:23-32](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

How do we deal with conflict in the church? Certainly not by pointing fingers and calling folks out during worship. But worship can be the place where we remember under whose authority we stand. It can be a reminder of the common mission we claim and the shared commitment that we have to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is a reminder that we sometimes need to move ourselves off the center so that place can be claimed by the Lord we serve. It can be a time of reorienting, of finding what we share so that we can look at the conflict with a little bit of distance and objectivity.

Quarreling and testing are common human experiences; we in the church do not claim freedom from that. The parable from Matthew asks us to pay attention to whether our words match our deeds. Do we live out the faith that we profess? Do we approach even those with whom we disagree with grace and love?

So, confession might be appropriate for this service. An acknowledgment that we have fallen short of the ideals we profess can be paired with an opportunity for a renewed commitment to let our lives be more congruent with our faith. Maybe the commitment needs to include some ritual action, kneeling at the altar, writing our intentions down, joining with others in prayer and promise, perhaps. There are many ways we can signal our intention to walk in the light we see, even as we seek more light. But also hear the forgiveness that is offered and accept the assurance that we are indeed surrounded by God's grace for the long haul.

We can then move to claiming the vision of who we are called to be. We sing of our mission, of the promise to move out into the world living out the hope that is within us. The benediction is a sending into mission, an encouragement to live out our faith in the world of our everyday living. This is how we endure for the long haul.

PREACHING NOTES

I am one of those concerned about the future of access to clean water and the struggle over water rights in the United States and beyond. As fierce as the battles over oil have been in our recent past (and present?), the wars over water may become even more strident. We need oil to power the world we have created. We need water to power the world God created. It seems more immediate and personal somehow.

Consequently, the Exodus text dominates on a day when the southwest US continues to suffer historic droughts, even after floods this past winter. Like the people wandering in the wilderness, we're thirsty too. And like them, we might be on the verge of panic. "Give us water to drink!" Talk about getting to the point. Moses seems offended, however. He hears the panic underneath. He hears the complaint, the frustration and anger on the verge of breaking out. So, he pushes back. "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" This isn't just about his leadership; this is about faith in the God who rescued them, the God who set them free. And before they are done, he renames the place. He calls it *Quarreling and Testing*. Now anytime anyone drives by and reads the signs or checks out the area on Google maps, they'll be reminded that this was the place where the people grumbled. Probably should have named the whole area Massah and Meribah because this wasn't the only quarreling place.

Jesus doesn't rename the temple *quarreling and testing*, but he could have. Everywhere he goes, it seems someone stands up with a question. And it usually is a question that isn't a question. It's a trap. It is a "gotcha" designed to make him look bad, or subversive, or an enemy of the faith. So it is with this question. "By what authority," they ask him. "How dare you," they might have said. Or maybe they did, under their collective breath. How dare you attempt to tell us what God is like, what God wants from us. How dare you do the things that you do, the healing and the accepting and the touching and the claiming? How dare you do these things? It sounds like a question, but it wasn't a question. It was a stone hurled at him. It was a finger pointed or a sneer directed his way. "Who do you think you are," they asked him.

Like Moses, Jesus could have gone to God and said, "Why did you give me such a recalcitrant group of people to work with?" He could have, but he didn't. Or maybe he was just so close to the God who sent him that he didn't need to. He knew what God wanted him to do—help them see, quench their thirst. So, Jesus turns the question around on them. "You want to talk about authority? Well, let's talk about authority. Show me yours and I'll show you mine."

So, they put their heads together and figure out the reverse trap, and they answer, "We don't know." "Great," Jesus says, "then you don't need to know mine either." Then he tells a parable about two sons who have a significant disconnect between words and deeds and asks, "Which do you prefer?" And everyone says, "deeds; we want those who do good things."

Of course, Jesus asks in such a way as to get the answer he wants. "Which of them did the will of his father?" He didn't ask which was better, who was more holy. And by so doing, he emphasized what God wants: folks to do the right thing, to do the loving thing, to do the justice-making thing. God wants those who can get their hands dirty, those who build community, who foster relationships, and who mentor those who come alongside.

You know, if pressed, I'll bet Jesus would say that those whose words match their deeds are to be prized as well. "That's the path we're on," he would argue—to let our words, our promises, our covenants match what we actually do. In the long haul of this faith journey, we are moving toward congruence, where our lives are whole, are of a piece. What you see is what you get; that's us.

But maybe, as he sums up this teaching, what he's saying is that what we need to work on first is living the faith. Even if we've come to it late, even if we don't know all the right words to say, even if we feel out of place among the people who have been doing this all their lives, even if we sit when we're supposed to stand when we come to worship or sing when we're supposed to be silent. Don't let that stop you from living it out; don't let a shaky past get in the way of how you choose to live today. Even if there are those who will come and ask you, "How dare you?" or "Who do you think you are?" Kin-dom living is about living, not just talking about it. And maybe some of the stuff we decide to quarrel about isn't really that important. Maybe some of the tests we devise for one another and for God aren't going to amount to anything of value in the long haul.

Do you know the really amazing thing about the Exodus account? God gave them water. God showed Moses where to find the very thing that they were shouting about. God didn't grumble back; God just said, "I'll go show you the rock where the water is. Come, strike the rock and water will come." I would have been inclined to make them wait for it, to test them as they tried to test me. But then, I guess that's why I'm not God. God, with amazing grace, provides, sustains, and walks with us, even when we go off track. Thanks be to God.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Fruit of the Kingdom

October 8, 2023

[Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#); [Matthew 21:33-46](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

How do we view the commandments? We honor them; we treasure them; we wish there was more obedience to them in the world out there. But do we see them as descriptive of our lives? Rather than seeing them as normative to everyone, what if we decided to see them as something we chose to be the guide for our lives? And what if we wanted to move from beyond the letter of this law into the spirit, what might that look like? Maybe the worship team could prepare cards with the commandments on them to hand out in worship. But instead of "thou shall" and "thou shalt not," you translate the words as "You are..." Then the law becomes a reminder of who we are. You are the people who have one God. You are the people who respect boundaries. You are the people who value worship and giving honor to God. These become, not commandments from the outside, but descriptions of our inner intentions and experience. "You are ..."

Christ as the cornerstone is another way of describing this inner-shaping process. Christ is what gives the church its shape, its definition and mission. Christ is what gives each of us our mission in life and reason for living. How do we present Christ as the cornerstone of our worship today? We can sing of Christ as our foundation and give praise to the one who shapes our living. Our prayer time can invite the Spirit to guide us into the right paths, even as we lift up others in our care, so that they too might know the light that directs our path.

Is there a hard edge to this process of shaping and being shaped? Certainly. But our call is not one of judgment on how others might be measuring up. Our call is to be the sign of those who are producing the fruit of the kingdom. As we worship, we invite the Spirit to work in us and through us to become workers in the vineyard, producing the fruit of the kingdom in ways that invite and encourage the body of Christ around us and the wider community of which we are a part.

PREACHING NOTES

I can't read these verses from Exodus without hearing my Hebrew professor from seminary tell us that we have mistranslated this text all along the way. "OK," she admitted, "the words work, but they don't really fit the flow. They don't really fit the spirit of the Exodus event," she argued.

Looking at our confused faces, she sighed in a bit of exasperation. "Look at the first verses," she told us. We looked at the scratching that the Hebrew language made on our page and puzzled out the words. "God spoke these words," it said. I'm the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery. The "commandments" begin with an act of redemption. The law begins with grace. So why, she asked us, would we assume these are heavy burdens laid on us with wagging fingers and furrowed brows? God isn't commanding obedience; God is inviting us into a new way of being with these verses. We shouldn't read them as commandments as much as descriptions.

God says, "I brought you out of slavery, out of bondage, so that you can be the people with no other God. Not the gods of the people around you, not the gods of your own making." The one who rescued you is the one you can worship. The one who loved you into freedom is the one you can love, so that you can be the people who celebrate that name, who know that name won't ever let them down. Because the name is the Presence, and the Presence will never leave you. And because I know that you will need help with these concepts, you can have a rhythm, you can have a pattern, and worship and rest will be woven into that pattern. The pattern will be there to help you be who you were created to be. The pattern will keep you close to the Presence, who is with you always.

And because you live in this Presence and follow this pattern, you honor those who give you life and who lead you. And you treasure all of life, knowing that it isn't to be thrown away for any reason. You honor the covenants that you make between you, covenants of love, covenants of property, covenants of honesty, covenants of communion and community. Because of the Presence and the pattern, you live in peace with your neighbor, you give respect and honor. That is just who you are. That is who you were created to be.

This isn't a law handed down to be slavishly obeyed under threat of punishment or exile. This is a description of how to fulfill the longings of our hearts. This is the freedom to be what is within us to be. This is a gift given to us by the one who loves us more than we can even imagine. This is us, these ten words. This defines us; this shapes us; this claims us, this Presence and this pattern.

This is who we are always becoming. That's the reason for the vision, the reason for the planning. How can we better grow to fit the picture that God draws for us here in the book of Exodus? That's why we continually ask, "How are we doing embracing the Presence and living into the pattern?" And because we struggled and we struggle with both, God sent the Son; God put on flesh and dwelt among us, the Presence in our midst and the pattern of living.

How can we embrace the Presence and follow the pattern for our own lives and in our own community? But also, how can we be the Presence for those who don't know whose they are yet? How can we live outwardly the pattern so that others are caught up in the hope of being made new? Those are the questions we ask this Sunday. There is a world out there, the world that God so loved that he sent ... us. We need trumpets and smoke. Or do we? Maybe we just need the Presence and the pattern. Maybe we

just need to live into the picture God draws in Exodus, chapter twenty. Maybe we need to be more like Jesus. Maybe.

Too wordy? Yeah, that happens to me all the time. Sorry. Trumpets and smoke. But behind it is a sincere desire to be the church of the Presence in a lonely world, to live the pattern in a lost world. God spoke all these words. Let's live them.

What happens, however, if we don't? If instead of seeing these words as a description of a way of living that is more whole, more fulfilling, and more connected, we see them as a burden. What happens then? Well, that's what Jesus is talking about in the gospel text for this week. We are now in charge of the garden, at least that's the thinking of the workers. "Let's kill him and get his inheritance." It'll be ours. We won't have to pay; we won't owe anything. We'll be in charge of our own world. Never mind that there are plenty of parables telling us we share in the inheritance, we want it for ourselves. We want to make the rules. We want to live by our own strength, by our own wisdom.

With a sigh, I am sure, Jesus asks them to finish his story. He doesn't want to or doesn't think he has to. "When the owner comes, what will he do?" They shouted the answer, named "those wretches" and the "miserable death" they deserved. I can't help but wonder if that was really the end of the story. If Jesus had finished it himself, what would he have said? Would he have said that the owner would try again? Would he have gone on one more time to describe the amazing grace that is available to all of us? Even the wretches.

Or maybe not. Maybe the fact that he didn't correct the crowd-sourced end to the story means that's what he would have said too. But he lets it lie unspoken and instead goes on to an appeal. This has happened before, he claims, this is the human *modus operandi* —this rejecting of the very thing that is good for you, that is supporting you. You have this inclination to want to do everything on your own to be the captain of your own destiny. And you'll most assuredly mess it up.

He goes on, it seems, to be as harsh as the bloodthirsty crowd a few verses earlier. "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." Pretty serious. Except, look again. He doesn't seem to be describing judgment, but consequences. This isn't an angry God who gets back at those who tried to steal the garden and kill the heir. This is a parent who wants you to know the consequences that come from attempting to navigate a complicated life without guidance, without direction and support. The cornerstone gives shape to the whole structure. The cornerstone holds it all together.

Jesus, like God and the ten words in Exodus, is trying to describe a life with and a life without the shape that God gives us. He hopes to warn us of the dangers ahead. But mostly, it seems, he wants us to be fruitful. That's what this is all about—not obedience for obedience's sake. But the law invites obedience in order to produce fruit, the fruit of the kingdom, the fruit that fulfills and sustains and creates community and produces hope and joy in abundance. This is the fruit for which we labor, the hope by which we live, the law that sustains and lifts up—the fruit of the kingdom.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Stiff-Necked People

October 15, 2023

[Exodus 32:1-14](#); [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

The theme this week might seem harsh. It might also lead us to point fingers at those out there or over there who are stiff-necked. Rarely will we realize that we are the ones in need of a neck massage. Perhaps worship this week begins with confession. We ask forgiveness for being a part of the problem instead of the means to the solution for our broken world. We might even go off after other gods – gods of nation or of self rather than the God we are called to worship. We are some of those who make light of the invitation at times; we are those who attend but don't bring our wedding garment, don't enter into the spirit of the call to discipleship. We are often halfhearted at best. So, let worship be our opportunity to reengage, to recommit to the journey of discipleship.

Yet starting with confession doesn't mean that the service is an oppressive one, that we are mournful as we gather for worship. No, throughout our worship experience, there is an air of celebration. Jesus describes kingdom living as a wedding feast, a party of commitment and promise and enduring joy. Yes, the parable speaks of the seriousness of this invitation and about the punishment meted out for missing out or for making light of the call. But we are not the ones who determine punishment. We are not the ones who cast out those who won't fit in. That's not our job. Our task is one of invitation and celebration, of grace and openness, even as we live out a life bounded by the law of God.

We invite the world to the banquet table. We show by our hospitality and our grace that we understand the depth of the call to be people of the law of love. The long haul makes it hard to sustain the party atmosphere, which is why we need the whole community to come alongside. We boost one another up when needed. We take turns, we step up, we share and work side by side, showing the neighborhood that we are producers of the fruit of the kingdom.

We don't invite from a spirit of self-righteousness or an air of superiority. No, we invite the stiff-necked people to join us stiff-necked ones, so that together we can ease into the grace of God; so that we can receive the God who remembers who we are and remembers the promise made to us. Worship is reorienting; we find our way back, again and again; we come back so that we can continue on for the long haul.

PREACHING NOTES

Stiff-necked is one of those descriptions that we don't use nearly enough. In Exodus 32, things blow up among God's people; and Aaron is complicit in the heresy, while Moses is hanging out on the mountain with God. God sees what happens and gets so angry that God asks for space from Moses so that the stiff-necked ones can be blown away and God will start over with Moses. Wow, stand back, Moses; this is going to be epic.

But then Moses doesn't stand back. He gets in God's face and says, "You've done all this to get them this far, and now you're going to pull the plug? And everyone around is going to say, 'What a nasty God, to go through all of this only to destroy them in the desert.' It isn't going to do your reputation any good."

This is the same God that, in the next chapter, Moses says, "Show me your glory." What better view of God's glory than to watch a whole nation be blown away? Except that isn't the kind of glory that Moses wants to follow. It isn't the kind of power that Moses wants to see. "Remember," Moses tells God, "remember the faithful ones, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants." Interesting that Moses uses the new name of the patriarch, Jacob. Elsewhere in the scriptures, the phrase is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But here, Moses calls him Israel, representing the whole people. And the translation of the name is "He who strives with God."

In other words, you picked these people, and you value the wrestling match. You wanted to be in a relationship with them, not simply have automatic obedience. This mess, and indeed it is a mess (Moses gets honked off too when he gets back down among them), is God's fault, Moses seems to be saying. So, don't blow up now. Get back in there and wrestle.

And the scripture says, "God changed his mind." What an amazing verse. You can say all you want about God really just testing Moses and seeing what Moses would do if God "pretended" to be angry enough to destroy the people. But the text says, "God changed his mind." It doesn't say God patted Moses on the head and said, "Good job, you figured out what I intended all along." No, no. It says, "God changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." On his people.

There is a claiming at last. Notice how the argument plays out. In verse 7, God is upset and angry about what is seen happening among the people with Aaron and the calf and the reveling. There God says, "Go down at once. Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt..." Your people, Moses, whom you brought out. Notice, God is already washing the divine hands of the people. But Moses claps back in verse 11: "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand." He takes God's own words and turns them around. Your people, Moses, God says. Your people, God, Moses says.

But wait a minute. It isn't simply a repetition. Moses adds to the declaration. "Your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand." With great power, says Moses. I couldn't do this; I couldn't have been responsible for this exodus event. It took someone of power. But not just power. "And a mighty hand." A personal investment. A connection was claimed here.

"Remember how all this started?", says Moses. "You said you were coming to set your people free. And you did it. I was an instrument; I was a tool in the working of the project. But you were the power. It was your hand, not mine, that set the people free. These are your people, Lord, don't forget that. Remember

the promises you made. Remember the connection you have, the investment in these people. Don't wipe them out only to start over."

And God changed God's mind. Then threw a party. Well, maybe not quite a party for those dancing around the golden calf. There was still work to be done and corrections to come. But there was a party coming. And Jesus wanted to tell us about that party. Our gospel text for this week recounts the essence of the party, at least in a parable form. Which, of course, raises all kinds of questions for us. That's the purpose of a parable, to raise questions. The word itself, *parable*, means *to throw alongside*. A parable is a story or a metaphor and image thrown alongside something else to show correlations or, sometimes, differences. The question sometimes is, "What is the parable thrown alongside?"

Matthew doesn't give us a lot of context this time. He just says, "once more Jesus spoke to them in parables." Well, yes, thank you. "It is the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. "It's like a party." But it's a specific kind of party, a wedding banquet. That means there is commitment involved. It means that something is being asked of those who attend. A wedding might simply be a spectator sport in our culture, but not so for Jesus. He sees something deeper and more profound, something that asks for something from us. That's why those who make light of the invitation are dealt with harshly. And it is also why that guy who showed up in the wrong clothes, well that wasn't just a fashion faux pas, it was something deeper. It was a thumbing of the nose at those being honored. And he too comes to a messy end.

Our question, of course, is how correlative is this story? In other words, is there an army ready to come to destroy any who make light of the kingdom of heaven? Or if we do show up but don't show the proper respect for the covenants involved, will the bouncers come and toss us out on our ears? Admit it, sometimes you hope so. At least you hope that those people over there get what is coming to them. We hope that those who sneer at us good people will suffer for their snub. What we don't hope is that the attitude check doesn't look too closely at us. After all, we aren't stiff-necked, are we?