

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

After the amount of bloodshed we have witnessed in our world this week, do we really need a parable in which messengers are beaten and killed, and in retaliation the king burns down people's cities? It hits a little too close to home. Yet Jesus was telling a story to people who thought they were insiders – only to be told they had not accepted God's invitation to relationship, and would be replaced by outsiders, randomly invited outsiders at that.

Once upon a time, the chosen people had replaced God. The people of Israel, wandering the wilderness after their miraculous rescue from slavery in Egypt, followed Moses but they never quite trusted him. When God asks Moses to visit with him up on Mount Sinai, and Moses stays up there a really long time, the people start to get antsy. "Did we make this whole thing up? Who is this Moses guy anyway? Who is this God anyway? Have we ever seen him? Why should we trust him? Sure, there was that manna thing, but what has he done for us lately?" And they decide they'd rather worship and put their trust in a god they can see. So they decide to build one.

This, my friends, is idolatry, when we withdraw our trust from God and worship something of our own making – a relationship, a job, things, certain kind of status. Idolatry is at the heart of war and terrorism, at the heart of the sickening violence we see in our world and even in our communities; It is at the heart of the greed that hordes goods and resources while others go hungry. All of it is turning away from the God we cannot see to put our trust in something we can see, whether or not it is worthy of our trust. Is there any thing or any one you feel you can't live without? That's idolatry.

And it is human nature. We all do it. Yet we are called to live out not of our human nature, but out of our supernatural, spiritual selves. We can turn away from those idols that claim our attention and life, and turn back to the God we cannot see but put our trust in anyway.

Here's the thing about what we worship – we are formed by it.
When our attention and will are focused on idols, things that are not God,
we are formed by those things – formed by their priorities.
Worship of money and material things forms us as consumers, often anxious.
Worship of people shapes us around their priorities, not our own.
Worship of position or affirmation forms us around constant striving.
When we turn from those things to worship God, we are formed by the Spirit of
God in whose image we were originally made. That first “formation” is restored.

And here's some good news – God helps us turn back. We don't have to do it alone.
We can start with the slightest intention, an incremental turn, and God says,
“Oh, here she comes. Let me meet her in the road and welcome her home.”
Because God, it seems, always has a Plan B.
In the story of the people and the golden calf, God is righteously angry –
God has delivered them from unbelievable oppression and led them to freedom,
and now they're thanking a golden cow for that? Smite them!
But Moses persuades God to turn again to his forgiving nature.

The “God-figure” in Jesus' parable – if that's who this king is meant to represent –
is also capable of great anger. He has planned the most amazing wedding feast
ever and invited all the people who claim to love him – and they said no.
In fact, they beat and even killed his servants who brought the invitations.
But this king has a plan B – to invite everyone else, all the people who never make
the cut when invitations are being handed out, all the people nobody thinks of,
or nobody thinks well of. Bring them all in, feed them, and we'll sort it later.
Just as in last week's story, he says to the religious leaders to whom he's speaking,
“The kingdom is going to be taken away from you
and given to these people you don't think are important.”
God always has a Plan B. In fact, we're God's Plan B.

BUT... here's a question: What about this poor guy who actually comes to the feast,
but is called out for not wearing “wedding garments,” and cast out?
What do the “wedding clothes” mean? Faith? An openness to God? Holiness?
If wedding clothes mean righteousness,
none of us are wearing the right clothes for this party.
But the great good news of our acceptance through Christ,
is that we have been clothed with Christ. St. Paul says that
“*All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.*”

Jesus has provided for us here too.

It is not by our own righteousness that we come to this feast, but his.

Martin Luther called this “the great exchange,” that the Lord of all, the King, left all that glory and took on our beggars’ rags, to walk us out of darkness into light. But he didn’t just put on our beggars’ rags – he gave to us his royal robes; through him we are invited to stand in the King’s court – not by our own goodness, but his.

God wants us at his feast. He wants us at his table.

And God also wants us clothed with his garments of salvation.

This is a feast to which anyone is invited –

Jew or Gentile, healthy or infirm, rich or poor, slave or free, woman or man – but we do have to be open to relationship with God.

“Many are called but few are chosen,” Matthew puts at the end of this parable. But the sense of the parable is more, “Many are called, but few say yes!”

Saying yes to God’s invitation – to turn away from the idols that claim us

to put our faith in Jesus Christ,

to commit yourself to his church, to offer a portion of your income,

to spend your time, to let your heart get involved with God’s people,

to risk all the messiness of participation in the life of a community entails;

saying yes to God’s invitation is taking a step into radical, life-giving trust.

Yet that is what we are invited to do: to trust God enough to accept his gift,

to come and pull up a chair and enter more deeply into God’s life.

We are baptized heirs to the promise. We are chosen. We are God’s Plan B.

We have been brought from all kinds of places to this banquet of love, ready or not.

Are we glad to be here? Are we ready to invite others?

Because there are a lot of empty seats at this table.

A lot of the people who have been invited for generations no longer bother to come.

So who else needs to hear this invitation?

Who are you being called to invite?

Who needs to hear they are chosen?

Amen.

READING FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

THE GOSPEL Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."