

October 15, 2017

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:4-9

Robed for Glory

Some years ago a cousin of mine and her fiancée climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. I should say, they almost climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro.

As you may know, that epic mountain presides over the African savannah. At its feet zebras graze, and elephants amble, and acacia trees stretch out in horizontal canopies. High above them the clouds converge in layers, and then yet higher above the clouds there's the mountain's majestic, frosted peak. Though just two hundred miles from the equator Mt. Kilimanjaro is topped with snow—for now, the snow is disappearing at an alarming rate. Before that happens my cousin and her now husband wanted to get to the very top of Kili, stand on ice at the highest point of a vast, hot, breathtaking continent. They saved up, trained hard, bought the necessary equipment, booked an expedition with a safari company. They arrived in Kenya and made their way to the mountain, made their way up it, days of hiking, until the penultimate one. As is customary, they woke in the middle of the night to make the final ascent, to the top, for the sunrise at the summit. They started walking, they were well on their way—and then they stopped. They decided not to go on. Their guide was pleading with them, he said, “C’mon, you are almost there. You’ll want to do this. You can do it.” But they didn’t. They told me it wasn’t exhaustion, or altitude sickness, they just decided to turn around and go back down.

I didn’t really understand that story, when they told it to me, I still don’t.

Why go to Paris, and refuse to look at paintings?

Why mix up chocolate chip cookie dough, and not eat one fresh out of the oven?

Why take a coupon for a complimentary day at a spa, but when welcomed at the door with a lovely white robe reply, “I’m fine in my sweaty, smelly clothes that I slept in last night.”

Something of that strange sort of refusal is at work in today’s gospel, in today’s strange gospel parable—a story that is hard to understand. There are, in fact, a number of refusals at work in this parable—including the ones at the beginning, the ones that come in response to the king’s first round of invitations: “I can’t come to the party, I have to work.” “I can’t come to the party, I’m out of town, or, I’m going to be, and I have to pack.” “I can’t come to the party, the kids have sports practice.” “I can’t come to the party, I have to flip my bedroom mattress.” The real zinger of refusal, though, comes at the end: the refusal that has to do with the robe—a refusal that is the strangest of all. This refusal includes a guest who, it seems, has been just brought in to the party, one of the good and bad all broadly invited, collected from the streets, perhaps without time to go home and get ready, perhaps coming from the streets they lived there, had no home to go to first? And the host is outraged, livid, dismisses this guest because they are not appropriately dressed, because they are not wearing a wedding robe! Which is what, exactly? And who even has one? But it is this guest, now, who is refused and in the most extreme of ways: banished into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

This is a parable of what the kingdom of heaven is like? Sounds like hell.

The word hell gets misused a lot. Sometimes casually, sometimes perniciously, as a scare tactic, or threat, or, most terribly, as a curse about a person’s worth: telling them where to go. In general, I am not a hellfire and brimstone preacher, but I don’t think it’s something to ignore. Though difficult, I think the end of this parable is important, worth attention, worth asking, what this story is saying to us, here. I am helped by a line about hell found in another

story, a play about a deal with the devil. The play's full title is *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, or more simply, *Dr. Faustus*. At one point in that story, as Faustus considers his earthly situation and what might come hereafter, he has a conversation with a fallen angel, now a demon named Mephistopheles. Faustus wonders aloud to Mephistopheles, "How they can even be having this conversation?" Faustus wonders how, on earth, he can be talking with a demon, on earth. Shouldn't a demon be confined to the underworld? Mephistopheles replies,

"Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?"

Hell is being invited to the party, but not going. Or going, but not changing, coming to the banquet but staying as you are, not putting on a robe—when there are plenty of robes, lovely white robes, they are offered upon arrival. Don't stay wearing the tired and dirty garb you came in. There are plenty of white robes here, hanging in a closet near the entrance. That's where we keep the wedding robes, the white robes—as any acolyte can tell you. We wear them, not because God is a fanatic about dress codes, but as a symbol for baptism, to remind us of the freshness, the cleansing, the new life God offers, absolutely free, ours to wear, ours to put on. God's grace changes us. It should change us. How sad it would be, if we came to the banquet and continued to sit in our own stink? How sad, if hearing words of forgiveness, we refuse to forgive? How sad if given this wondrous, gracious gift, being a member of God's party, we are no more generous, or patient, or kind than before?

God demands that we change. God demands it with the fierceness that comes with great love, with the fierceness that comes when something great is at stake: when it's a question of whether we live as though dead and damned—or if though dying, we live.

God invites us to the latter. God invites us with a passion. God says to us, "Change!" and then helps us do so, gives us helpers, guides. God gives us the Holy Spirit, our first and primary help. We could not change, we could not even believe change is possible, but for the Holy Spirit. And God gives us scripture and its guides. Like the apostle Paul, the writer of the book of Philippians, and that incredible passage that we just heard. Paul wrote that beautiful invitation to a changed life from prison. Even there, even though he was about to die, Paul could write, "Rejoice." And God gives us helpers and guides right here in this congregation. They are sitting all around you. We recognize and name one of them aloud every year on this day of our annual meeting. They are guides, they and others around us, and before us, and others to come, all a part of a great cloud of witnesses, who help us, who tell us "Keep going, keep walking, you are almost there, you'll want to do this. See the Sun rise."