

*See then that ye walked circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil.* Ephesians 5:15-16

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In light of all the many different things going on in this week's Gospel we need to make sure that we do not lose sight of two fundamental points:

First, always remember that God passionately loves you, just the way you are.

That may seem odd to us who hear over and over again the good news of God's love, but we ought not to assume that everyone knows this at every possible level.

So it's especially our responsibility as the church in a world which is so often divided along lines of culture and race and class and gender and orientation and politics; in a world which so easily and so often ignores and dismisses others because they're different, it's incredibly important that we proclaim a God who passionately loves us, passionately seeks us, passionately welcomes us, and invites us to sit at the table, just as we are. A God who loves us not just conceptually or theoretically; not passively but actively; continually seeking us out. Who doesn't just sit back and wait for us to discover him but comes to us always, in all times and in all places, but especially in those places and times when so much around us seems hopeless and dark.

God loves you passionately, just the way you are.

And the second point is this: the same God who loves you passionately, just the way you are, also loves you too much to just leave you that way.

If you remember nothing else of what I say, remember those two things

In this week's gospel a king throws a wedding feast for his son. The king sends out his servant to invite the guests, but apparently no one wants to come. So the king sends out more servants, a second wave of messengers, if you will; but some of the guests still have better things to do; and the others abuse and even kill the messengers.

So, finally a third wave is sent out and the king instructs them to bring anybody they can find. I don't care what they look like. I don't care where they are. I don't care who they are. I just want the house filled with guests. Go out to the highways and byways. Look under the rocks and behind the trees. In every nook and cranny. Gather all that you can find. The lame and the blind and the deaf anyone. The good, the bad, and the ugly. In fact all of those who wouldn't normally get invited to such a feast. Fill the wedding hall as full as you can fill it.

Which, as you will understand, perfectly illustrates that first point that I asked you to remember; that God loves you passionately, just the way you are. That he will pursue you no matter where you are; regardless of what rock you may have been hiding under; or what bush you been hiding behind. He loves you and he pursues you.

But that's not the end of the story. There's more. The king comes to the banquet hall to survey the guests. But amongst all of that great crowd the king sees one guest who's not wearing the right garment. So the king goes to the man and asks him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without the wedding garment?' But the man has no answer. He has nothing to say. So the king orders his servants to bind him hand and foot; to throw him out of the hall in a place of weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

It is a dark and troubling end to what we assumed was going to be a joyful story; a story of celebrating and feasting. But let's think of the story this way. This story of the

wedding feast is a story that speaks of our salvation. It's a metaphor that speaks of the whole narrative arc of the gospel story, from the very beginning of scripture to its very end. It speaks of the active passionate love of a God who seeks us out and calls us into relationship with him and with each other.

The King in this story is God the Father; and the Son is Jesus Christ. The wedding banquet is the heavenly feast; the marriage between Christ the groom and his Church the bride; the story of eternal life with God which we are promised in Christ. The first wave of servants who go out to bring in the guests represents Moses and the Law; but the people are distracted by other things; they're disinterested; they have better things to do; and they refuse to listen. The second wave represents the prophets who renewed God's call; but they hear only more excuses; and are subject to violence. The third wave represents the Church, the Apostolic community, called by Christ to go to the very corners of the world; to bring people into that relationship with the king at the wedding feast of the son; the invitation no longer limited to the people of the covenant but to all: the good, the bad, and the ugly. You with me. Those anywhere and everywhere who are called to sit at the banquet.

So we get this part. This is that image that I spoke of earlier; the image of an active passionate God seeking us out no matter where we are, no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, or what we have left undone. God loving us just the way we are.

But then there's that troubling scene where this guy gets thrown out for not wearing the right thing. Now, we should perhaps understand that this is not economic tyranny. This is not a man being thrown out of the wedding banquet because he couldn't afford the wedding clothes. The wedding clothes would have been supplied by the king. He's thrown out because he did not care enough to put on the gift that the king had given.

The good news is God's gracious invitation to all to share in the joy of his son Jesus Christ. It's an invitation to sit at the table to be fed and nourished.

But it is also an invitation to change and be changed. It's an invitation to be transformed into the image and likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's our only task. We are to be renewed in the image and likeness of our creator, in righteousness and holiness.

Everyone is invited to the banquet but if we truly want to stay, we have to be changed: to be turned away from the destructive power of selfish love. That's what Christ does for us. He does the impossible. He breaks the chain of violence and vengeance. He takes the faults and failings of our lives, the sins of our hands and hearts, and he makes us clean. He clothes us in the clothes we cannot afford to buy ourselves. And all we have to do is put them on.

God loves you passionately, just the way you are; and he loves you too much to leave you that way.

And as we struggle to find hope in a world of incredible confusion and sadness and violence and division and bitterness, we are invited to a feast. Where we are asked to sit and enjoy the good things that God has, in his grace, prepared. To enjoy his gifts without living in the fear that we will be abandoned or forgotten; without living in the desperate fear that motivates so much of our world to disunity and division. Knowing that Christ has clothed us with his grace. Knowing that he has reserved a space for us at the table. And all we have to do is say yes. To be willing to take our seat. In other words, to be willing to be transformed; to be willing to be healed and made whole.