

Missing the Party

19th Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Exodus 32.1-14;
Psalm 106.1-6, 19-23;
Philippians 4.1-9;
Matthew 22.1-14

On a week when we have phrases coming from the mouth of God like let “my wrath may burn hot against them” or Jesus saying “throw him into outer darkness” – I’m grateful a group of us have been reading a book about how to read the Bible together. Our Wednesday fall series is reading the book by Rob Bell entitled *What is the Bible?*

There was a section about how the Jewish people have always wrestled with scripture together in community. How Jesus would have been formed by this practice of hearing a passage and then people voicing their opinions and raising their questions. Looking to interpret it’s meaning together. The image Rob Bell used was thinking of the scriptures as a multi-faceted gem that you want to turn and look at from a variety of angles.¹ If what stands out in our first hearing are these terrifying words of judgment, perhaps it’s time to look from a different angle so that some light could be refracted to reveal some deeper meaning perhaps even some beauty and life from these texts.

On the whole, the idea of a jealous God who cannot tolerate any rivals seems so primitive. In a way it is. That was the predominant paradigm in the ancient near east. They assumed a pantheon of gods who were constant rivals demanding loyalty, punishing betrayal among the human beings created as their servants. This was the air they breathed. This was the lens through which they saw; this was the filter through which they heard. It’s inevitable that the categories and assumptions of those old lenses and filters would shape the way they tell the story. What’s remarkable is the way that

¹ Bell, Rob *What Is the Bible: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way you Think and Feel about Everything* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2017), 152-154.

the story of God's life with the Hebrew people keeps challenging and upending their assumptions.

For the ancient people the life with their gods was a guessing game. The giving of the law is experienced among Jewish people not as a burden imposed by a demanding God but as a gift of love. In a chapter we read on Wednesday night, what happens on Mt. Sinai when the law is given is described as "the ultimate union between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human."² One of my theology professors once described the "wrath of God" as a picture of what love looks like when it is resisted. The eruption of anger in this passage is meant to capture the depth of God's love for us as human beings.

Further, this is the second story we've heard this summer and fall of a human being wrestling with God: pushing back, asking questions, making demands. It's a remarkable invitation that pushes at some of our assumptions and filters about what our life with God should be.

That's what is happening up on the mountain. Now what was going on down at the camp when the people asked Aaron to make for them some new gods? Moses was late and they were scared. The Jewish reading of this story puts Moses' delay at one DAY. That's it! Clearly, they were frightened; the trauma of their escape, the dangers in the wilderness, not knowing where they were going. Their anxiety through those days of waiting had been churning, their speculation growing and the lid holding back all of that fear was fragile. One day past their expectation and the thing blows sky high.

That's the thing about these stories. Peel away the primitive features and what remains at the heart needs very little translation. We know from fragile lids trying to tamp down fear. We know what it looks like to grasp after something, anything, to put our hands on after waiting too long for a God you cannot see to calm the fears that you cannot keep quiet any more. In our prayer of confession today, we named how fragile our trust in God can be: easily crushed by our forgetfulness, easily broken by any delay,

² Ibid, 155.

easily displaced by the gods of our own making. There is not much distance between this text and our life when seen from this angle.

Let's turn now to the parable of Jesus. Over the course of two chapters we have watched as Jesus confronts the temple leaders of his day. Let's just say the gloves are off. Jesus does not mince words when he makes clear to them that they are missing it - have been missing it - when it comes to what God's wants from them and for them. He tells these parables of the vineyard last week and the wedding banquet today. Each of them begins with images of God's vast generosity: rich fertile land where a vineyard is planted and tended with care or today's extravagant feast laid out with love and invitations issued far and wide. These beginnings connect to that overarching theme I spoke of with the children re: God's expansive love and delight in us.

Our life with God begins with this expansive love that invites us into this place where the joy of heaven and earth meet. The invitation requires our response. In the words of Dr. Seuss: "God has given us brains in our head and feet in our shoes."³ What we do matters. Not to remove the invitation. That part is done. You are invited. This table is set for you. Period. Full stop. The question is whether we will enter in or whether we will miss the party.

What Jesus is telling the religious leaders is that their trust in God is so fragile that they have taken what was a beautiful gift of the law meant to put flesh on the command to love God and neighbor and meant to ease some of the anxiety of those ancient people and have instead turned it into a rigid system of rules that have sucked the life and love right out of it. As Jesus keeps trying to bring the life and love back to the center - to let the light come through from a different angle - they refuse to let their lenses and filters be altered. The more they resist to see themselves in these stories the stronger the warnings become. He has no problem evoking those images of wrath and putting the fear of God in them.

Parables were meant to get people's attention; to help us to see ourselves and how and when we may be missing what God is doing. It's a mistake to take the shock value from these stories and create a systematic theology

³ This line was used with the children in reading *Oh, the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss

about judgment and eternal life from them. Jesus amps up the drama to wake them up.

He does it because our fragile trust has consequences. When it leads us to become rigid and exacting and nervous about our place in God's realm it becomes easy to reassure ourselves by pointing the finger of judgment at the other. This is the master ploy of religious people both then and now.

The book of Philippians today gives to us some very practical advice about how we can shore up some resilience in the face of our fragility - to keep us from rendering that kind of harm. When the lid is being barely held down on our anxiety we go to some pretty dark places. Especially when we are trying to keep people from knowing about it. This is a particular risk for us as people of faith. Because we think we need to project strength, because we think weakness is failure, because we've told ourselves questions are a problem, the moment we feel fragile is the moment it can get really ugly. Look at the crowd at the bottom of the mountain. Look at the temple leaders.

Which is why Paul tells us to tend with great care our communal life. In the struggle of sharing life together - working together at this faith that demands so much from us - that is where our fragile trust will find its strength. It requires us to be gentle with each other. Although in reading some reflection on this verse the word for "gentle" literally means something closer to "forbearance." Give each other some slack. Don't be so quick to take offense. Make some room for each other when our fragile places are bumping up against each other.

Here's one piece someone wrote about this: "our natural propensity is...to render harsh judgment on one another, as the least demanding way to exalt ourselves....denigrating others can lift us above them without our having to undertake anything ourselves."⁴ He described this move in the church as a kind of slight-of-hand martial arts. We're good at it!

Paul's invitation is to do something all together different: to recognize that this is struggle - this life of faith - this life together - helping each other

⁴ Burrell, David B. *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 162.

and asking for help is the way we strengthen the fragile places. When Paul says do not worry but bring everything before God in prayer, this isn't a slap on the hand if you happen to worry. It's a reminder and invitation to speak up and make some requests.

After working through this passage from Philippians I happened across an article in the NY Times on building resilience in middle age. There is a lot of talk about how to build resilience in children. This was directed toward adults who are past that time and might wonder is there any hope for us. There were about seven suggestions in the article⁵. I could tie at least three or four of them to this passage in Philippians. I'll mention just two. Things like "practice optimism." Not to deny the struggle but to frame it in a more hopeful way. Looking for what is true and honorable and commendable – these things may be buried under the *stuff* that you are facing but it's there. Keeping our eyes on those things as we as we keep doing the things we have learned and received and heard – it builds resilience.

Or the section on systems of support. Not just the support we receive but the support we give. What we give actually boosts our resilience even more than what we receive according to this study. The whole passage for Paul begins in that place: "Help these women, these companions who have struggled with me in the gospel." Stand with them, give them support.

Living together in these ways is the place where the joy of heaven and earth meet. Both when our life together is flourishing and when we are holding each other up around those fragile places.

And now may this Word from God
open us to visions we have never known,
strengthen us for self-givings we have never made and
delight us with a joy we could never have imagined.⁶

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/well/mind/how-to-boost-resilience-in-midlife.html? r=0>

⁶ Paraphrased from *Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace* by John Philip Newell.