

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 23—Year A
Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

We've definitely got some folks dealing with some anger issues today.

First, there's the **king** in the **gospel parable who's giving a wedding feast for his son**. And it's quite a lavish do. **But when the slaves call all those who'd been invited to the wedding feast, they won't come. He sends other slaves** to explain to the **invited guests** just how much has gone into this feast—that **he's prepared this elaborate dinner, that his oxen and fat calves have been slaughtered**, that everything is just so, so come on and come! **But those invited made light of it, and they go away**. Some are just *too busy*, and **they head off to their farms or their businesses**. Others are just *bored*—**they take possession of the slaves and treat them shamefully**, making sport of this abuse, as those who hold power sometimes do to feed their twisted desires. There is a long line of these kind of folks from the slave masters of old to those involved in the sex trade today to powerful men exploiting less powerful women, Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein being the latest example.

All of this **provokes the king's anger**, and he sort of loses it—he **sends in his troops who destroy those murderers and burn their city**.

Then, he tells his slaves that the wedding is ready, but those invited weren't worthy, weren't befitting, their actions weren't *congruous* with the wedding feast, their actions *didn't line up* with the celebration at hand. So **the king told the slaves to go into the highways, and invite everyone they found to the wedding feast**. And the slaves did just that, **they went out into the traveler's way 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 wasn't wearing a wedding robe, and he asked him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to his servants, **'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.

I looked at every word in greek trying to find some way to unlock this parable in a kinder, gentler way, but it pretty much says what it says. Just seems sort of *extreme* to **throw somebody out** just because they didn't come dressed in the appropriate attire. I'm not even sure that Emily Post would have counseled *that* action. That doesn't seem to be the epitome of hospitality that one would expect of a host, especially a **king**.

And then you've got the whole wrath-of-God thing going on in **Exodus**. Here, **Moses is delayed coming down the mountain; the people get anxious**, and their anxiety swamps them, hijacking their collective executive function. **They decide they'll just make them some gods that'll go before them**—*that sounds like a reasonable response*. **Aaron**, feeling the responsibility as the go-to guy when Moses is away, caves to his anxiety as a leader with a restless people, and he starts trying to implement their plan. He **told the people to take off all the gold earrings on their wives, sons, and daughters, and to bring all that gold to him. He took all that gold,**

fashioned it with an engraving tool and made it into a molten calf, and a golden calf emerged from that mold, and *voilà*, the people said, “These are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

Aaron got swept up in the golden-calf-this-is-your-god fever and built an altar before it; and then made a proclamation: “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”

So, they got up early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play—“*we got us some gods and all is good.*”

But all was not good on the mountaintop; God is right displeased. And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down; for your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have gone to ruin, destroyed themselves, corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded; they have made for themselves a molten calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’”

And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked, *obstinate* people; now therefore let me *alone*, that my wrath may burn hot against *them* and I may consume *them*; but Moses, *you’re my guy*, of *you* I will make a great nation.”

Oh, God has some anger issues. Hot, burning, consuming, divine wrath.

But this made Moses sick inside, and he entreated the LORD his God and said, “Oh LORD, why does your anger burn against *your* people whom *you* have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand. Why should the Egyptians get bragging rights and say, “With evil intent he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains, and to *finish* them, to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your *burning anger*, and be moved with *pity*, have *compassion* about *doing evil* to your people.

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants and they shall inherit it forever.’”

And the LORD was moved with *pity*, the LORD had *compassion* about *the evil* which he said he would do to his people. In other words, *God changed God’s mind*.

Anger can consume us. Anger can carry us away. Anger can make us want to destroy another, but why? What is beneath the anger?

Back to the **king**. Okay, have any of you ever *planned a wedding*, especially a wedding for a child? Do you remember how much care went into the guest list, all the haggling about who you would invite and who you didn’t have room for? Oh my goodness. And then, planning the menu for the reception. Remember that? Which appetizer, which entrée, one or two entrees, and what about the table decorations, and who’s going to sit next to whom? Months and months of preparation go into preparing for a wedding feast. And the folks you’ve invited, you want them there.

So, just think of the hurt when it comes time to actually show up and folks just don't come. At first, you'd just be puzzled—you have relationships with these people, why wouldn't they come? And then, they make light of the invitation, and they've got better things to do, like go to work, and some of them are just mean and abusive to the people trying to help you pull off this feast? And, you don't want your son to be hurt.

Yeah, it's not too hard to understand **why the king flies into a murderous rage; the king is hurt, and he's also hurt on behalf of his child.** Okay, **killing** all of them and **burning their city** is over the top—duly noted. But then, the **king** actually *regroups*. The **king** goes to *plan B*, “By golly, we're going to have a wedding feast!” *And then, his invitation is generous and non-discriminating; everyone gets to come, good and bad, and that fills the hall with guests.*

All is good. The wedding feast is a superb success. Everyone gets to feast and dance this night; everyone who wants to come gets to come, but then, there's that **guy who's not wearing the wedding robe.** *We don't know why he doesn't wear the robe*—maybe he couldn't afford one, maybe his was at the cleaners, maybe he just didn't care. But for the **king**, it was **just too much**—“*I invited you here; you belong here; you are welcome here, but being here means you wear the clothes that come with sitting at this table.*”

His anger, again, gets the better of him, and **he tells his servants to throw him out into the outer darkness, the weeping and gnashing of teeth outer darkness, with a proclamation, 'For many are called, but few are chosen.'**”

Okay, *I think the king overshoots here*, but what if we *widen* our lens. It's **Jesus telling us this parable, and he's already dismissed the whole vengeance MO in the parable before this one.** There's got to be something else going on here.

Clothes are outward and visible signs, and if the wedding feast is **THE** image for being in communion with God and knowing that our True Self is absolutely beloved of God, *then our outward and visible lives should reflect that belovedness.*

Do we wear our wedding garment and celebrate that we beloved and worthy of that love? OR, do we continue to slink around refusing to put on that robe of belovedness? And if we shun that *robe of belovedness*, well, then *our shame* has indeed bound us hand and foot and thrown us out into the outer darkness, and that is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth because *our shame* is yelling at us that *we're not worthy to be in that hall*, when *the truth* is **God just wants our power and light and loveliness to radiate out through every aspect of our being, and God laments when we hide that light under a bushel.**

And back to all that **red, hot, burning anger in Exodus.** *Again, the anger stems from hurt.* My goodness, **God has delivered them out of slavery in Egypt, parted the daggone Red Sea, fed them manna, given them water from a rock, and gone before them and behind them, and the people sense a little bit of absence in their human leader,** which they blow up into *a story of divine cut-and-run, and in their anxiety, they make gods for themselves.*

We're no stranger to this. What gods do we fashion for ourselves because we don't know what do to with anxiety; we don't know what to do with our dark nights of the soul when what we

feel most is divine absence? What molten images are we busy engraving and then bowing down to in worship?

God is hurt because God has gone *all-in* in God's relationship with God's people. And so often, when we're hurt, we sever. "My people" become "*your people, Moses.*" *God forgets all that God has done with this people.* And God's anger flares, and yet, when you look at the hebrew, that word for "anger" is like *flaring nostrils*; it's the energy of *adrenaline* and *frustration* and *passion* and *hurt* that gets captured under that word "anger."

And Moses plays such a key role here. **Moses is the one who *reminds* God of the bigger story, *reminds* God of all that God has been through with this people, *reminds* them of this deep and broad web of relationship.** And those *flaring nostrils* finally give way to *the nostrils that sigh* when one *remembers* that one's life is *inextricably bound* to another's. It's the *sigh of compassion* that says, "I can't do evil to you because *I love you* more than I can even bear to admit."

Love is *hard*. Relationship is *hard*. Remembering the ties that bind us one to another is *hard*. When you *love a lot*, you are *completely vulnerable*, and you can be *hurt, a lot*. *This being in love*, whether it's the love between partners, or children and parents, or between friends, or amongst a community—it is a *risky, risky venture*. And **things happen**, and **anxiety** worms its way in, and **words are spoken**, and **actions are taken**, and *nostrils flare with red, hot passion*. And we *need each other to remember the bigger story that holds us*, to *recall the history of our relationships* that *reminds us* of *all we've been through together*, that **gentle voice** that says, "You don't want to destroy them; *they are your people*;" that **gentle entreating presence**, that **Moses in our midst**, who helps us *drop back down into our hearts* and *helps our flaring nostrils to give way to the sigh of compassion that heals the heart*.

So, whether it's the king of the gospel parable, or God and Moses in Exodus, today, *we're invited to reflect on anger*. What *triggers* it for us? And **beneath the flaring nostrils**, *what passion is in play*, and **beneath that**, *what's the hurt, what's the wound to our heart*? Who are the **Moses'** in our life who *help us to remember the longer view, the bigger story*? And in our torn culture, *how might we be called to be Moses for others, calling others to remember their deeper connections* one to another? Can we have the *humility* to let *flaring nostrils shift to compassionate sighs*? Can we *do battle with our shame voices* and *take the leap to don our wedding robe*, so that *all the world can be reminded of their glorious belovedness*?

The king and God may struggle with anger issues, but *all of us can go there in a heartbeat*. *Explore the hurt* that takes you there, *open your ears* to those who **entreat you to remember the deeper truth of relationship and connection**, and then *let your flaring nostrils soften*.

The world could use a lot more of us **sighing our way to compassion**. Amen.

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