

Sunday, October 12, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “God Changed His Mind”

These are tough readings this week.

First, God gets angry enough over the Israelites idolatry that he threatens to consume them in fire.

Then we hear a parable that at first seems to be extending an extravagant welcome to strangers but ends with the guest with the wrong clothes being tossed into the night.

Both passages remind us that scripture is complex, laden with hidden meaning, and oft times contradictory.

Readings like these call us to dig deeply into the stories to understand the divine message.

Readings like these require us to listen to the Word – deeply listen.

Deep listening is defined as the ability to hear fully what another person is saying, without being distracted by preparing a response or rebuttal.

I believe that Jesus used the parable to teach his listeners to take in the full story – not to assume that they knew what he was going to say – or what meaning he assigned to the action.

I picture them all listening as he told this particular parable and then looking at one another and going “What?!”

My study of this passage this week exposed a variety of interpretations – there was no clear consensus among theologians about the meaning of this tale.

Some said it was about people who show up but don’t participate; others said it was a story about respect for the host;

another claimed this was all about who gets in and who is excluded.

It is our charge, our challenge to determine what this parable is saying to us in this time and this place.

Last Sunday, Andover Newton Theological School welcomed Reverend Martin Copenhaver as their new president.

The theme of his installation service, held at Old South Church in Boston, was humility, shared brokenness and hope.

He spoke of the importance of recognizing that we are all broken, flawed in some way and that it is our shared brokenness that brings us together.

He quoted his Yale Divinity School professor Henri Nouwen

“ The more I think of the meaning of living and acting in the name of Christ, the more I realize that what I have to offer to others is not my intelligence, skill, power, influence or connections but my own human brokenness through which the love of God can manifest itself. God has a way of working through flawed people.”

I believe today’s scripture readings tell us that God invites us, all of us, no matter how flawed, into God’s kingdom.

God invites us into the kingdom and creates opportunities for us to serve.

With the invitation, however, comes responsibility;

an obligation to adhere to God’s rules and respect the fact that God is God and we are human.

In the Old Testament reading God has generously and graciously rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

He has brought them out with a mighty hand.

He has fed them, provided water and kept them safe.

He has given them commandments to live by – has entered into a covenant with them.

But it is not enough.

The people want a God they can see, a God they can touch, so Aaron, their priest, succumbs to their wishes and creates a golden calf for them to worship.

God is not happy.

God has been dismissed and He is not taking it well.

He vents to Moses and threatens to wipe out the ungrateful throng.

Moses pleads with God on their behalf and God changes his mind.

“And the Lord changed his mind.”

I think that is one of the most intriguing lines in scripture.

God, recognized that his beloved Israelites were human, flawed, broken.

Rather than wrath, he forgives.

This will not be the last time that God forgives the transgressions of his created beings.

Scripture is replete with stories of our human mistakes and God’s gracious, steadfast love.

God is forgiving us all of the time.

In Matthew's gospel, the King invites his friends to a wedding party.

Just to be clear on the parable-speak here...the King aka God,

invites his friends, aka us, to his celebration aka life and they are too busy to attend aka...hmmm

So the King does not give up – he wants to have a party, so he invites all of the people who would normally be left out of such an event...aka the marginalized of society.

Now these folks are excited about being invited and to show their appreciation they live up to the King's expectations of the way wedding guests ought to act...all but one.

One fellow decides that he is entitled to be at the banquet and that he doesn't have to do anything special to show gratitude to the King – he just has to show up.

Once again, the King is angry – but there is no Moses to intervene – and this broken, flawed human gets tossed out onto the street.

Invitation, Opportunity, Obligation.

My friends, God has invited each and every one of us to be a part of his kingdom – of his party.

Our faith – a gift from a gracious God, is our ticket in.

Once we are in the kingdom we are expected to follow the rules – to adhere to God's will for us.

This week's essay from the Center for Healthy Churches, is called "Dreaming With God."

Dr. Bill Wilson suggests that the idea of God's will for us has been so distorted over time that we no longer pay attention to it.

"For many people, the will of God is a mysterious, elusive and frustrating concept.

We speak of God's will as though it was something he hides or does not want us to know.

Some confuse God's will with luck or coincidence or happenstance.

Others are sure that if they could just decipher God's will, then their life or their family, or their marriage or their church, or their career would be straightened out and all would be well.

At times of tragedy or death, some blame God for things that are far from his intentions for us.

Others reduce God's will to pragmatic decisions about whom to date, what school to attend, where to eat dinner, what to do on vacation, etc.

God's will has become a source of conflict and confusion for many."

We just prayed these words together in the Lord's prayer

“ Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

God's will is inextricably connected to God's Kingdom - on earth as it is in heaven.

God's will is bound up in all those things that bring God's Kingdom to reality among us.

Dr. Wilson reveals that he has stopped talking about God's will and started talking about “God's dream for us.”

He finds that this new way of thinking generates energy as people envision possibilities and activate a part of their imagination that has been dormant for far too long.

He points out that “Healthy churches dream. Healthy clergy have visions. Healthy Christians have healthy imaginations.”

What is God's dream for you? For us?

For the Israelites it was a new land.

For the wedding guests it was a celebration.

For today's Christian it is often hope.

Hope was the major theme of Reverend Copenhaver's inaugural address.

“To live by hope is to lean toward the future knowing that what we most need is not yet with us.

A plant that is confined indoors will lean toward the window, to be closer to that which gives life, even though it has never seen the sun.

The same is true of us when we live by hope.

We lean toward the future in hope because what we most need is just out of sight.”

What is God's dream for us? How do we lean toward the light?

What is the truth that we take from God changing his mind and sparing the Israelites or Jesus' wedding guest being tossed into the night?

The truth is that God offers us an invitation.

The invitation is our being – our creation – we embody the invitation.

The opportunity is to live fully – here – in the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

The obligation is to do it with integrity, with respect, with honor, with love.

My friends, you are each invited to the feast – come, let us rejoice with pure hearts.

Let us offer honor, respect and glory to the one who created us and sustains us.

Let us lean, ever so gently, into the light.