

Elizabeth L. Windsor, D. Min.
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23 (UMH 829)
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

And There Will Be NO More “Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth”

The prayer we said this morning is one of my favorites: “The Holy Scriptures are given for our learning . . . that we might hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them.” Reading Scripture passages at regularly appointed times is an ancient practice begun by the Jewish people and continued in various forms throughout Christian history. United Methodists use the Revised Common Lectionary along with many of our Protestant siblings. Each Sunday, the RCL follows a three-year cycle of Scripture including readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament letters, and a passage from one of the Gospels. It is the preacher’s task to discern the common themes in the readings and explore them with the congregation so that we might together learn wisdom from them and apply that wisdom to our lives and the life of the Church.

We usually focus on the Gospel first – and today’s parable from Matthew is what we expect –sort of. A ruler invites friends and peers to a banquet to celebrate the wedding of his son. He sends stewards to them with invitations – not once, but twice- but they are not to be bothered and kill the stewards. The ruler angrily destroys them in return, and sends other stewards out into the streets to gather everyone they can find. And people come –good and bad. If the parable ended here, “the Realm of Heaven is compared to a wedding banquet” would make some sense to us. But that isn’t where the parable ends. The Ruler enters the banquet, sees someone not properly attired and has the ill-dressed guest ‘bound and cast into outer darkness where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Really? If the Kingdom of God includes everyone, it is a rather harsh punishment to not only be cast out for being improperly attired, but left there “greatly weeping and gnashing teeth.”

The common theme of this Sunday’s readings is God’s people making the wrong choice and inspiring God’s wrath. Those Israelites left with Aaron at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses is on the mountain top with God receiving the Commandments are like the original guests invited to the wedding feast. Familiar ways of worship and the routine matters of life distract from God’s call to an unimagined future. Idolatry in its different forms is the common theme. But there is something else that draws my attention in today’s readings; the “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Matthew uses this phrase five times in his Gospel. Scholars believe it was added later for emphasis to those parables in which it appears. It marks a

clear divide between those who belong in the Realm of God and those who are “cast into outer darkness.”

This phrase does not appear in the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus, but there is surely a whole lot “weeping and gnashing of teeth” going on; God is the one who has been “cast out” by worship of the Golden Calf. And God has had it.

Like the Psalm this morning, we have to go back in the story a bit to understand how God came to “weep and gnash teeth.” Ever since they fled Egypt, the people of God have been unruly, ungrateful and discontented. They have continually bewailed their lack of water and food and in the Old Testament reading a few Sundays back, they loudly complained to Moses, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly.” As awful as slavery was, Egypt was familiar, predictable and routine. God’s people wanted to go back to what they knew - it sure beat wandering around in the desert hungry and thirsty, having no idea or vision for what will happen next.

Out of love, God provides them with quail and manna and water – and they still aren’t satisfied. God continually reminds the Israelites that “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” We have heard this over and over the past few weeks’ readings. It is a profession of God’s love for the people. Even the Commandments that God gives Moses to take as a pledge to the people begin with, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other Gods before me.”

No wonder God is fed up with the lot of them when they worship the Golden Calf. God’s anger is so fierce it causes God to reframe the story. God says to Moses, “YOUR people who YOU brought out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely.” “Weeping and gnashing teeth,” God promises Moses to “visit wrath” upon the people. Poor Moses- everybody –including God – blames him. Yet Moses remains calm and talks God out of a destructive response to the Golden Calf. Moses will have his turn to “weep and gnash teeth” next Sunday.

But can you identify with how the people must have felt? Can you blame them for being lost, hungry and scared in unfamiliar territory, wanting to go back to what they know? Their reaction is so understandably human that Biblical scholars and Church leaders even have a name for them – “The Back to Egypt Committee.” Every Church has one.

Have you ever been a member of the “Back to Egypt Committee? I know I have. I’ll bet most of us have. We live in a tense and uncharted time. So much has changed. “Egypt” is an especially attractive place for those of us who rely

on the Church and our faith community to support us as we dwell in the anxiety of constant change. We yearn for the comfort of “Egypt”, predictable, routine and many times, far rosier than it actually was.

We are particularly vulnerable to the “Back to Egypt Committee” when we think about stewardship. We remember the former vitality of our connections to one another – pot-luck suppers and all-church retreats. We recall the numbers attending Sunday School and Youth Group, the sound of those who sang in a larger choir– some of us even remember going to Church on Wednesday nights. We miss much-loved prayers, familiar language, the old hymns – and we grieve terribly for beloved members now resting in the arms of Jesus. We mourn who we were – often times destructively “weeping and gnashing our teeth.” Like the Israelites, our understandably human desire to recreate our past, prevents us from imaging the future to which God now calls us.

And it isn’t just individual faith communities whose hearts hurt. Some of the largest “Back to Egypt Committees” can be found among clergy and faith leaders. We gather at conferences and workshops, “weeping and gnashing our teeth” over smaller congregations, the difficulty in recruiting volunteers, and the things that keep folks from worship on Sunday mornings.

Especially during stewardship season, “The Back to Egypt Committees” make idols of the Church we no longer are. It is right to remember, and important to mourn our losses, but it is destructive – especially during stewardship season - to indulge our desire to “weep and gnash our teeth” rather than discern what God is asking of us right now.

Like the 10 Commandments, the witness of the Church of the past is a pledge of love to the future of the Church we are being called to imagine in this very moment. Plenty has changed; God’s love for us hasn’t. Jesus still walks among us. The Holy Spirit is just as present as she was on the Day of Pentecost. Like the Israelites, God calls us to leave the past and discover new ways of living the “Realm of God.”

As we intentionally focus on stewardship these next weeks, I invite us to resign our membership in the “Back to Egypt Committee.” Let’s reflect together, pray unceasingly together, dream together what membership could look like in the Church God is wooing us to co-create. We don’t know yet what that Church will look like, but we can be confident there will be a Church. And there will be NO more “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”