**Welcoming the Poor?**

October 15, 2023 Pentecost 20

Matthew 22: 1-14 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week, Tuesday is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and I thought it would be a good week to have Kale MacLellan speak on her advocacy for and support of the Houseless in Regina. Last night I learned that she lost her voice after being involved in a Conference over the weekend, and I had to come up with a message at the last minute to share with you this morning. As a result of the lateness, I didn’t take the time to find as many images to go with my words.

At Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Books study, we have been reading a book called Bible Stories for Grown Ups by Josh Scott. I met Josh in 2015 at a gathering I went to hosted by Brian McLaren of emerging leaders and initiators discerning how to be church in our time. Josh is now the pastor of GracePointe Church in Nashville, a progressive evangelical megachurch that is affirming of LGBTQ folk. His book helps us look at familiar stories from a different lens than what we may experienced from our usual place of privilege. Josh identifies as a white, heterosexual cis gender man, and works to take a fresh view of the passages. He knows that we read scripture and anything else from our lens of privilege. Josh works to read scripture with suspicion of the way he reads it, and has heard it over his years, which would support his privilege. The traditional reading and interpretation of many parables, support the systems of power and privilege.

This week, the parable in the book study was the Parable of the Talents. You may remember this story as the one where the rich master goes away and leaves different amounts with three different slaves. A talent is not meant to be talking about the gifts we are given, as is often the interpretation, it is an amount, 16 years of wages or about $6000. Think about that – the master gives the slaves 5 talents, 3 talents and one talent. It’s a huge amount of money. The slave with the one talent buried it away and gave it all back to the Master, while the others invested, and both doubled their amounts. They were praised and the other was thrown out where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. Josh identifies that this slave, names how unjust the master is and how he feared him so he buried talent and then gave it back. He refused to participate in the system of injustice, use the money that was earned unjustly and would not even put it in a bank to gain interest, because that was against Jewish law. He was being faithful to God’s calling of righteousness. Maybe he is the Jesus figure, in this story, who also suffers because of his refusal to participate in an unjust system.

In today’s parable, we have a king who is in power and upholds it with violence and terror, including terrorizing those who have excuses not to come to his banquet. I wonder if the first people did not come because they didn’t want to support this horrible tyrant. The poor people may have attended out of fear. Everyone at the wedding banquet would have been given and expected to wear a wedding robe, a sign of the King’s power and privilege. Josh suggests that the person without the robe, is protesting the empire, refusing to participate in the system of power and privilege. What if this person was like Jesus? What if that is the message? Jesus challenged and refused to participate in much of the system of the religious and Roman authorities and as a result was crucified, very similar to being cast into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. What if the invitation, the kingdom of heaven is to be like the one who refuses to participate in the system? That is a very different and challenging message and call for us. Both parables challenge the systems of injustice and the people supporting it.

These perspectives can help us see scripture, our lives and world events in a different light. This week we have been horrified by the attack on Israel by Hamas, who killed innocent Israelis including women and children. Many government leaders and powers focus on this act of terror by Hamas, and neglect to name the context of the wider systems in place. The Palestinians are living under occupation by Israel in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. They have been terrorized by the Israeli forces for decades, with militarized responses by Hamas, and more recently there have been repeated attacks by the Israeli Defence Forces on the Al Asqsa Mosque , the third holiest Islamic site in the Old City of Jerusalem. If you look at statistics of deaths of any conflict between Israel and Palestine, the number of Palestinians dead far outweighs the number of Israelis. So one of my reflections this week in response to Government leaders, including our Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, denouncing Hamas as a terrorist organization, is that if we are going to name that, we also need to name the state terrorism that the Palestinians have been experiencing by the Israeli state. While we do so, we need to distinguish the states from the people on both sides. The majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace and many are working together toward peace. We denounce the deplorable and horrendous violence on all sides, knowing that we are now hearing about the Israeli defences killing women and children as they **flee to Southern Gaza**, even though there is no room for them there. The systems and positions of privilege provide one perspective, and it is important to look for the wider realities and other perspectives to get a fuller picture of what is happening in these kinds of circumstances. We pray for peace, and I pray that this madness will push both sides to get back to negotiating toward peace and reconciliation for both peoples.

The Parable from today’s gospel does have a wonderful image of the King inviting people off the streets to come to his banquet. While his intentions may not have been pure, it is potentially another image of the kingdom of God, where all are welcomed to the table. As winter approaches, I have been thinking about how we can provide a warm welcome to unhoused people who need to keep warm at night. This week a group of 20 people representing churches, front-line agencies, and volunteers with the houseless met to consider providing overnight accommodation, food and warmth for the houseless over the winter. It was a very overwhelming prospect to consider how to open enough churches across the city, with enough volunteers, and the challenges of potentially bussing the unhoused to various locations throughout the city each night. As we named this and what other options there might be, we discussed the option of having a central warming centre overnight which Churches could volunteer to provide food and beverages for one night a month, as well as volunteers, along with drawing on volunteers from other communities for the overnight shifts. This seemed much more manageable and a good possibility which we agreed to work towards. One agency is going back to their board to talk about offering their space which would be a central downtown location. We are also looking to the city to see if they can provide the funding from the warming bus for this project, which we would look to start in January. We decided to call it Warm Welcome.

As we move through these challenging days, may we be conscious of our Jewish and Palestinian and Muslim neighbours both of whom are suffering deeply. May we be open to looking through lenses of those who oppressed and marginalized and be suspicious of the lens of privilege and power. May we be open to welcoming the poor and marginalized to our table and resisting the systems that keep them poor.

In closing, as we reflect on these passages and the events of this week, I invite us to reflect on the New Testament reading for this week that we didn’t read from Philippians 4: 8-9

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Amen