

Isaiah 25:1-9 Bill Uetrict 10.8.26 Pentecost 20

“All are welcome friend and stranger at the banquet of the Savior. All are welcome; all are welcome here.” (sung)

“All are welcome. All are welcome. All are welcome in this place.” (sung)

These are two of our favorite songs around here. They reflect the spirit that so many of us in the congregation want to embody. All are welcome.

That message is fundamental to the identity of this community. It's what we want to communicate at all times, especially when we gather for the meal. You don't have to be a member of our club to participate in communion. All are welcome.

This message definitely corresponds to the spirit of a portion of our reading from Isaiah today. In Isaiah's massive poetry we are bombarded with an avalanche of “alls:”

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all* peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.”

“And he will destroy on this mountain that shroud that is cast over *all* peoples, the covering that is spread over *all* nations.”

“Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from *all* faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from *all* the earth.”

This is the vision of the end of time, a dream of what I like to call the “final future.” And as is often the case for Jewish imagination, the best stuff, the final future is depicted not as a matter of harps playing on clouds, but as a party, a party with the best food and drink, the best of life. But there is something missing at this party. There is no death, no grief, no tears. Life is what it ought to be. And this party that is the party above all parties is meant for *all*

people, *all* nations. This isn't a private club party. This isn't a membership-only gathering. This isn't a soiree that is meant to make you feel good about your ethnic or socioeconomic group, your little political party, your nation, yourself. This is a bash for all. All are welcome. That settles that, right?

But the Bible is a little more complicated than that. Or at least the readings for today are. Isaiah's imagination of "all" is bookended by what appears to be less than "all-ness." The first portion of our text, which really is a praise song, seems less than friendly *to all*. God is being praised because he has given to Israel what we must assume is a victory in a battle. Now whether this is a reference to a specific battle or is just some kind of statement about God's general commitment to the underdog is hard to say. But clearly, God is pictured in this portion of Isaiah as one who brings down violence on the writer's enemies. "For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of foreigners is a city no more; it will never be rebuilt."

This is not friendly, especially to a foreign nation, described as a *ruthless* people. What happened to "all are welcome, friend and stranger at the banquet of the Savior"?

And you should note what happens after Isaiah describes the banquet for all nations. "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food" turns into, "The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place as straw is trodden down in the manure." Well, there is a welcoming statement. I guess all are welcome, unless you are the Moabites, a great enemy of Israel. They are to be trodden upon in manure. Are all welcome or not?

And what do you make of the strange parable from Matthew today? A king is hosting a wedding banquet for his son and through his slaves invites all kinds of people to the banquet. Oh good, all are welcome! Well, those invited don't respond. In fact, they kill the messengers. So, the king sends some of his other slaves to invite other people to the party. And those people also don't respond, which ticks the king off and causes him to send his troops in to murder them and destroy their city. All are welcome? This is some brutal stuff.

Now I will note that after these outbursts of anger, the king does secure a crowd for his party. He commands his slaves to go among the ordinary folks and invites them to the grand gala. He clearly wasn't having any luck with the big wigs, the muckety mucks, the leadership, but does get a big crowd from among the working people, the folks from the main streets.

All are welcome, I guess, if you are ordinary. But even one among the ordinary gets kicked out of the party because, well, he is not wearing the right clothes. Oh my gosh, Jesus. Help me out. I can't imagine you care about what people are wearing to the party. Didn't you say something like what defiles a person comes from within—their thoughts, words, and actions—not from external things? What in the heck is going on?

Well, something you probably need to understand is that the gospels were written by individuals who were dealing with their own audiences and issues. What we have today is Matthew dealing with his congregation, engaging in what might be called intra-family dialogue. Matthew is a Jew who is addressing a Jewish audience, an audience that contained other Jews who did not fully buy into the

Jesus story. He's not happy about that. And he's particularly not happy with the leadership of these Jews. He believes that they are leading people astray. He wants them to change their actions and their minds, using exaggeration to get his point across, exaggeration that uses violence to grab his audience's attention and unsettle them.

Matthew believes that God is throwing a massive party in Jesus, but some are choosing not to party. He doesn't understand this. Why would you not come to the party when the best food and drink is being served? Why would you reject the invitation, especially to a wedding for the king's son?

And as for the man who isn't dressed appropriately for the party, well, I don't think figuring out this portion of the story is easy. You have to wonder if this portion of the parable was originally a part of another parable. There is an awkwardness to the way the story works out. Some think that that awkwardness can be understood by grasping the insight that in Biblical days, kings or bigwigs when inviting people to grand parties, provided them with the clothes that they are supposed to wear. So maybe this is another "they-don't-want-to-party" motif. You don't wear the provided clothes, then you obviously don't want to party.

Others think that Matthew with this odd story is critiquing his fellow Jews, particularly their leadership, for not putting on the robes of righteousness that he thinks is particularly important for following Jesus. For Matthew, perhaps, his fellow Jews aren't doing what they are supposed to do. And what they are supposed to do is believe in Jesus and live out what Jesus teaches. They are not doing that, so out of the party they go.

Truthfully, I don't know what to fully make of Matthew's odd story, except to suggest that there are expectations for us who participate in the Jesus movement. Yes, all are welcome, but don't think that means that our response to the welcome of God doesn't matter. Don't think that God's grand party of grace is an invitation to do whatever you darn well please. Grace is free, but it is not cheap.

All are welcome, but not *everything* is. Maybe that's what Isaiah is saying when he mixes the party for all nations with a stinginess toward his nation's enemies. Yes, Isaiah is being phenomenally human as his poetry anticipates a united cosmos while his prose is not sure he wants to include everybody. But more than revealing raw humanness, Isaiah is making it clear that some things aren't welcome in the world of God. And for Isaiah, some of those things include injustice and oppression. The enemies he is identifying are the ruthless nations, those who have been callous, he says, to the poor and the needy. All are welcome, but cruelty and injustice aren't. Think about what that might mean in our own times, for places like Ukraine and Gaza. What's happening there is not okay. God, Isaiah claims, is "a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress." The ruthless nations, on the other hand, are recipients of God's judgment.

All are welcome? Yes. But not everything is. A party is being thrown for all people and all things? Yes. But don't think that means that there aren't expectations. And the big expectation is for you to party, to actively participate in the feast of love and grace that God is throwing, which fundamentally is about wearing the clothes of righteousness.