

“More Than an RSVP”

By Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta
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Based upon Isaiah 25:1-9, Matthew 22:1-14

*The will of God in life
Does not come in straight lines,
Or clear signs
Or certain choices.*

*Life is not a set of constants
To which we cling for security
Or seek for affirmation
On the contrary,
Life is often confusing
And blurred,
Unsure under foot, tentative,
And shaky to the touch.*

*Our relationships do not feel
As firmly as they once did.
Work is not invulnerable to change.
The world around us has tilted and tipped,
Perhaps by our doing, but
Without our permission.*

Nothing is what it promised to be.

*But one thing is inescapable,
The way we deal with whatever happens
On the outside
Will depend entirely
On what we have become
On the inside.*

*Wherever we have fixed our hearts,
Whatever it is to which we have given them,
Will determine the way we experience,
All that is happening.
Indeed it is the stability of heart,
Not the stability of place,
That is the real gift.*

*Stability of heart-
Commitment to the life of the soul,
Faithfulness to the community,
Perseverance in our search for God-
This is the mooring that holds us fast,
When the night of the soul
Is at its deepest dark,
And the noontime sun sears the spirit.*

*When life seems unclear and out of control,
It is the stability of the heart that leads us.*

These are the words of Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, author, and lecturer, former chair of the Global Peace Initiative for Women, committed in her teachings and writings to place the ancient Benedictine Rule in modern language for the benefit of all faith traditions. This ancient rule has always encouraged ways of meaningful living in the very center of a complex world, without ever withdrawing from the world.

As a former nurse of many years, when I hear the term “stability of the heart,” I want to take your pulse. I think “Vital Signs.” Is your pulse regular and strong or thready and intermittent? What is that blood pressure telling me about the heart’s stability, how it contracts and relaxes in order to push blood and oxygen to the major organs? And what’s that EKG saying about electrical signals of the heart? This is what comes to my mind when I hear “stability of the heart.”

As important as vital signs are, these are not the vital signs to which Chittister refers. She's referencing the spiritual stability of the heart. Well, how is that measured? Is there even an assessment tool? And what does 'stability of the heart' even mean?

Perhaps our Gospel lesson this morning, this ugly parable can give us a window into some understanding about the spiritual stability of the heart. Yes, you heard correctly, I called this parable ugly, and I am not the only one. Preachers will often bypass this text on the week it comes up in lectionary or take off that Sunday and have a guest preacher. (Just kidding!) It's one of those stories that Jesus tells where we hope that we will get more comfortable as we keep reading only to find that it gets worse.

Now, the listeners in Matthew's day would have heard this as a final judgment parable. The *Gospel of Matthew* was written at the end of the first century, sixty or so years after Jesus' death. These early Christians, cultivating and growing into this new identity as Christians, really thought that end times would be within their lifetime. So, there was great interest in the final judgment.

Well, here we are in 2020, and we can go back to scripture and hear Jesus words that even he didn't know about the end of time. His advice to his disciples was to live fully into present and future, taking the Gospel message into the world and leave the end of time in God's purview. So, to keep this parable in that one frame is very limiting. Scholars and wise teachers of scripture remind us that the Holy Spirit is at work through these words today and for our time.

It doesn't change the fact that this feels like and reads like an ugly parable. But let's get to this allegorical banquet. So, there is a king giving a wedding banquet for his son. What the king has prepared is the finest beyond what we can imagine, but those invited shrug it off, better things to do, maybe a more socially desirable invitation. Have you ever been shrugged off? Have you ever done that to someone? We probably know how this king feels.

A friend once told me about having to confront a family member because every time she invited him to her home for a meal or a visit, his response was "That sounds great. I'll get back with you." Now, we all have to check our calendars, but for this to be his standard response seemed strange to her, whether she invited him a month before or a day before. She said that it always seemed that he would be glad to come unless something better came along. "Whether intended or not, it hurt," she said, "And it made me angry."

This king is hurt and angry, the preparation and planning for this lavish feast only to have it so casually regarded. So, the king sends out the slaves and says, invite everyone. Tell them to come. The banquet table is ready. I have so much to offer.

The image of the king, the son, and the wedding banquet is used in the New Testament stories, so we can think of this king as God inviting us to this banquet. Jill Duffield of the *Presbyterian Outlook* writes: "God invites us to the greatest, most abundant, lavish feast imaginable and we shrug and choose to ignore the honor of this invitation. Then we kidnap and kill the ones sent with the message that the king really desires our presence, even longs for it."

Admittedly, the parable might read like an egotistical king throwing a temper tantrum. But what if it's really a message of how much God wants us to come.

Imagine that the picture on the bulletin this morning, that lavish feast table is set with the food of grace abundant and overflowing and freely given to us just because we are so loved. This kind of love should take our breath away, send us to our knees, and put tears in our eyes. But we think we have better things to do. This invitation to be in God's presence should command our attention, render everything else secondary, get us moving in the direction of this party immediately. Focusing on God and what God desires to pour into us is what gives us stability of heart that can lead our way.

Well, the parable stays ugly, doesn't it? Who would have thought that fashion was a factor in attending this banquet? There's this poor guy in from the streets who is not wearing the proper garment and he gets thrown out. Fashion is a huge factor. The preacher Tom Long writes, "God wants everyone to come to this banquet, but not everyone wants to come or knows how to behave once they get there." Clothing metaphors are very prominent in the New Testament to indicate a person's inner life and soul and how that life is lived with choices and service and extending the grace that we have received.

I officiated at a wedding one time, and the groom was obsessed with clothing. He was the costume designer for a local opera company, a job that he loved because he got to work with clothing every day. He was a gentleman of faith, but didn't know a lot about scripture, and in planning the wedding ceremony, he said to me, "Are there any scripture passages about clothing?" "Hey, buddy," I said, "You have come to the right place." I love these opportunities to help people understand that the Bible has everything. This couple used the passage from *Colossians* that says, "Dress yourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, gratitude." This is the wedding garment, and it can be given to us when we arrive before God at the banquet of grace. But like the invitation, some of us refuse the garment. We come to the party, but continue to guard our egos and ways of living that are only self-serving.

You see, this banquet requires more than just an RSVP. You can't just come into this feast and hang around the punch bowl munching on the crudités, dressed in a coat of complicity or a gown of exclusion or pants of corruption, hats of bigotry, strapped with backpacks of hatred. This is the clothing that blocks God's hospitality and grace and tears apart a community. It's not allowed at this banquet and your insistence on wearing it will cause you to be more than escorted to the door. Fashion matters, the fashion of all that is God's goodness, the willingness to put on the garment of humility, dressing in the clothing of knowing how much we need God.

Showing up is a start, but God requires more than an RSVP. We can't be looking over God's shoulder to see if there is a more desirable opportunity that might benefit us and be less sacrificing. Grace can be frightening because it does change us and make us face our own vulnerabilities. Sometimes we go to God in a very piecemeal way. "I can only stay a few minutes." "Of course, I am a Christian. I'm in church for an hour every Sunday and I carry my Bible." "It all sounds good, God, but let me check my schedule and get back to you."

Tom Long continues to write that even when the man wearing the improper clothes made his presence known at the party, he still didn't understand what was being served at the table. "Where was the awe? Where was the wonder? Where was the regard for God's generosity?" God's grace stabilizes our hearts, making a discernible difference in who we are and how we live.

Friends, our hearts need to be stable!
The heart of our community needs to be stable!
The heart of our country needs to be stable!
The heart of our world needs to be stable!

This is a journey. Chittister writes, "This journey is constructed of patience and trust, of perseverance and persistence. But it is the stability of heart that tells us to push on even when we are tired of pushing. Stability of heart tells us that the prayer and the work and the service and the study and the reading and the believing are worth it, even when all of it feels useless and pointless and empty of the God we had hoped to find."

God is here! God invitation always stands, run to the party, get to the banquet, be filled and renewed with grace that gives us the spiritual energy of a stable heart, that gives us the courage to do God's work in the world, to check the clothing that's in our own closets and to speak out when someone is wearing the wrong clothing because it doesn't have to be that way. Whatever obstacles we face, whatever walls seem to entrap us, whatever the spiritual fatigue that weighs us down the God of our heart is in the midst of us, inviting us to come with the table set with the nourishment that will lead the way.

Stability of heart-
Commitment to the life of the soul,
Faithfulness to the community,
Perseverance in our search for God.
This is the mooring that holds us fast.

Thanks be to God for this ugly parable. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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