

15 October 2023, 20 Pentecost (Proper 23A, Track 1)
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

Robed in Prayer Together for Peace

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

What can I say? We have all watched as Israel and Palestine endure unspeakable violence that has raged for more than a week. As people lose their homes, their loved ones, and their lives, statements from the outside have tended toward justifications, choosing sides like picking a sports team, and far too simplistic attempts to assign blame. "It's their fault. No, it's their fault." As war rages on the ground, a different war rages in public opinion and on social media. Deciding whom to blame is not going to spare a single life.

We lose sight of the very real pain felt by those in Israel, in Palestine, and around the world. We lose sight of the worries our neighbors experience as they await news of their loved ones. We lose sight of the fact that we are all

children of God. We lose sight of the fact that God wants nothing less than for each of us and all of us to live safely in the goodness God knit into creation. We lose sight of the fact that our job is to side with life, justice, and peace.

Even as we advocate for and pray for peace, it doesn't feel like enough. People are still suffering. People are still dying. People are still terrified. What power do I have – or does any one of us have – to end this violence? How does praying for peace make any difference? What can I do to make a seemingly helpless and hopeless situation that is largely in the hands of others any less helpless and hopeless? I looked for answers, for hope, in this week's readings. To be honest, at first, I came up short.

I love this passage from Philippians, but it has left me a bit wanting. Paul has the audacity to counsel us not to worry about anything. He tells us, rather, to pray and that we will receive peace. That sounds lovely, but it rings a bit hollow in the face of the images of violence we have seen – and the violence across the globe that we don't see. Really, Paul?! Don't worry about anything? We need only pray – with thanksgiving even? And poof! Peace, not just any peace, but God's very own peace would shower us. Watching

people suffer and die while we lack any real impact on global leaders, it seems we're going to need a lot more than prayer.

Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet doesn't seem to help either. The first group invited rejects the invitation, some in violent ways. Another group, this one consisting of good and bad people, seemingly accepts the invitation. But then the king gets angry that one of his last-minute guests isn't wearing a wedding robe. Who cares?! Shouldn't the king be happy that people showed up?

Of course, this parable, like all the parables, is meant to be read allegorically. And it is meant to give us glimpses of who God is and how God operates, not entire coherent systematic theologies.

One lesson we could glean from this parable is that, somewhat like the king, God willingly give us multiple chances. The king invites one group, then another. Even after someone accepts the invitation to the wedding banquet but fails to wear a wedding robe, the king doesn't just toss him out. This guest gets the chance to say or do something to explain himself. But, in response to the king, he is silent. He could have explained why he didn't have a wedding robe and sought the king's mercy. He could have gotten up and put

on a wedding robe. He could have made some attempt, even an imperfect one, to right this wrong.

God is, in fact, far more gracious than the king in the parable. God has called and continues to call us again and again to the wedding banquet, to experience the fullness and goodness of God's kingdom revealed in creation and humanity as God intended.

The wedding robe in the story represents our obligation in accepting God's invitation. Sure, God repeatedly invites us to and eagerly hopes we accept the invitation to the wedding banquet, but acceptance carries with it responsibilities. We must dress for the occasion. We have to put on the wedding robe of love, justice, and peace. That's all well and good, but in looking at a situation like the war in Israel and Palestine or war anywhere else in the world, peace seems to require convincing others, those in power, to don this wedding robe. How do I do that? How do any of us do that? How do any of us convince others to put down weapons, put on a wedding robe, and attend the wedding banquet with their supposed enemies?

A Jewish friend shared with me his experience going to synagogue this past Friday. There was a strong police presence to guard the safety of those worshipping, but there were many others as well. He told me of people and

clergy from all faiths standing together in love and prayer. His words: “It’s very touching.” This helped me see our readings this week a bit differently.

In my helplessness and hopelessness, I had forgotten something important. I had focused on the question “What can I do?” I wanted to know how my prayers for peace could make a difference. What does my putting on the wedding robe do for the man who showed up without one? These are all the wrong questions. My question should have been: What can we do together?

These people assembled at a synagogue on Friday night in the name of peace and love for their siblings refocused me on the other people in the wedding banquet parable: the people who accepted the invitation and put on their wedding robes. They show that, not only does God give us many changes, but it is possible for us to make different choices. What if the man at the wedding banquet without a wedding robe had looked around and seen the others? What if the others had offered to help him find and put on a wedding robe? What if the wedding banquet had been a group project that they all took part in?

The assembly at the synagogue last Friday, likewise, shows us a different way. They show that it is possible to choose love and peace. They put on their wedding robes for the banquet, and in so doing, they showed that it was

possible for any of us and all of us to do the same. We can choose to put on the wedding robe of love and peace – and there is enormous power in doing it together. Seeing this touched my friend. Think of how many others were similarly touched. Think of how many others could be similarly touched.

These people gathered in the name of love and peace also reminded me that Paul did not write his instruction to pray and not to worry about anything to one person. He wrote that instruction to a community. Paul's words may ring hollow when we think about our individual prayers, but he encouraged the Philippians to support one another and to pray together. The cure for their anxiety was to gather in community and pray. That is what would lead them to experience God's peace real and alive in their presence.

Where is there hope? There is hope not in me or in you. There is hope in us because there is hope in God, and, together, we bear the very image of God. We believe that, even amid unspeakable violence, when we stand together, when we pray together, when we put on our wedding robes and go to the banquet together, there can be healing in our broken world. We believe that together our prayers can change hearts and minds by revealing God's profound, unshakable love for all people and all creation. Our hope is in God.

Our hope is in us standing together bearing the image of God and proclaiming God's love and goodness in the world.

Amen.