Opinion
Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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The stories we invent disclose a great deal about us and what we believe. Not being a big fan of dogma, Jesus created tales that revealed his understanding of divine realities. In today's parable, he uses an image from Isaiah, depicting God as a king who longs to share a banquet of love.

Because everyone in his audience knew Isaiah's writings, Jesus counted on their cultural memory to help them visualize a lavish menu of juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. Then, with their imaginary table set, people would also recall the atmosphere Isaiah had described: the end of sorrow, shame and even death.

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 11, 2020

Isaiah 25:6-10a

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

Matthew 22:1-14

Isaiah's celebration replicated the sumptuous table of Psalm 23 and the peaceful, verdant pastures surrounding those who dwell in the house of the Lord.

When Jesus talked about the king who prepared the wedding feast, his audience realized that he was depicting how God loves and longs to share divine joy with humanity. But the king in Jesus' story quickly became a tragic character.

Instead of being a cherished shepherd-leader, reasonably respected as royal, or even feared like a dictator, this king fared as poorly as did Harry Potter in his muggle uncle's house. Nobody seemed concerned about what this king thought or felt, much

less were they willing to party with him. Rather than celebrate as a community, the citizens of the realm concentrated on their individual pursuits.

Although this king had cultivated relationships with his people as carefully as he had prepared the banquet, when the decisive moment came, all his efforts seemed to have been in vain. The very people with whom he wanted to share his joy boycotted his banquet and scorned the life he offered. Rejecting his kingship, they inevitably fell prey to the meaningless violence that results from disdaining the common good.

When the king sent out his servants for the third time, he ordered them to invite everyone who was willing to come: cultivated or crude, renowned or infamous, religious or infidel. Absolutely anyone who wanted to participate was welcome.

Although the revised celebration hardly resembled the original plan, the activity, the sounds and the smells permeating the atmosphere proved that the king and his people were enjoying the festivities. All except for the spoiler.

One person showed up with no intention of celebrating. The man who refused to wear a wedding garment was not a disdainer or rebel like the elites who refused the king's invitation. He was a subversive, intent on ruining the celebration from the inside. Like a skunk, he specialized in spraying emotional poison among those who came in contact with him.

Jesus depicted the spoiler as the most insidious person at the banquet, and perhaps in the whole realm. A pretender to fidelity, by refusing to dress appropriately he flaunted the fact that he considered himself distinct from all the others. While the majority of the guests were far from saintly, this one person, assuming some sort of personal infallibility, attended the banquet but absolved himself from participating in its camaraderie.

Refusing to put on a garment of joy, the spoiler contaminated the celebration with discord and temptation, excommunicating himself even before he was evicted.

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Today, we'll find spoilers among people of high rank as well as in the seemingly most ordinary individuals in church and civil society. They include authority figures who prey on others and the mean-spirited folks who delight in highlighting the flaws in every good work.

They are treacherous because, unlike honest enemies, they wriggle their way into a community and pollute it from the inside. Their superior, judgmental and denigrating attitudes can be dangerously contagious and their activity can inhibit others from joining or enjoying the party.

What are we to take from this parable?

We might take it as a warning about rejecting God's invitation: an old-fashioned invitation to the fear of God. On the other hand, we might hear this as Jesus' sympathetic, tender portrait of his ever-inviting, perennially thwarted Father.

The second alternative invites us beyond our self-concern to contemplate God's relentless, unrequited love.

It's clear that the second alternative is more in keeping with Jesus' character and beliefs. Jesus continually opened the way to transformation and prayed that his persecutors would be forgiven. Knowing that, we'll hear this parable as his depiction of God's unflagging attempts to give us all that we are willing to accept: rich nourishment and an end to sorrow, shame and death.

Today, as Jesus gives us a glimpse of his vision of God, he offers us a choice. Let us repudiate the spoilers and allow ourselves be touched deeply by God's desire that we — all of us — accept the invitation to enter in and fully enjoy the banquet of life God spreads before us.

[St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone serves on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.]