

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 15, 2023

**“The servants went out into the streets
and gathered all they found, bad and good alike.”**

So concludes another story from the mouth of Jesus, another example of Jesus teaching his disciples through the use of a story. And like so many parables, this is one that doesn't really end in the way we think it's going to end. In fact, there is one more detail added on in the longer version, one in which someone not wearing a wedding garment is cast out into the darkness. Yet, it easily could have been mentioned earlier in the story because it fits in well with what had come before.

You see, this story sets up in what appears to be a rather predictable way. A king is throwing a wedding feast. And we see person after person not attending the banquet for a variety of reasons: Ignoring the invitation, mistreatment of the king's servants, and later failing to be properly attired. And we read those lines probably imagining that we know where the story is going. The king is unhappy with certain invitees who, in one way or another, have revealed themselves as unworthy of the invitation. And

the logical ending, the logical thing to expect is pretty clear. The king is eventually going to bring to the party people who are worthy of it, people who “check all the boxes”. Eventually we will hear how his servants went into the streets and rounded up the best, - the “good” people who deserved to be at the party.

But that’s not what happened.

**“The servants went out into the streets
and gathered all they found, bad and good alike.”**

Wait a minute. The bad? The king let the “bad” into the party?

I thought it was the opposite. Isn’t being “good” the guarantee - the “ticket” we need to be with God forever, be at the eternal banquet, be in heaven? Isn’t that the way it “works”? After all we just heard Jesus say,

“Many are invited, but few are chosen.”

That seems to imply that getting to heaven is extremely difficult, seems to imply that we have to get just about everything right in this life to even have a chance at

getting in. It's as if heaven is an extremely exclusive club with a really strict doorman who allows only a couple of people here or there to trickle in. Yet, here is the king letting in not only good people but bad people as well. What did they do to deserve that?

My dear friends in Christ, the more we try to “figure out” how all this “works” the more we can drive ourselves crazy. The truth is, we know very little about these very sorts of things, and throughout its history the Church has even struggled to illuminate these things for us in a helpful and healthy way. Every time human beings try to put a mystery (of any kind) into words we run the risk of falling somewhat short, or misleading others, or confusing the issue in the minds of those we're trying to help, trying to encourage and trying to inform.

And so, if we find ourselves wondering about these things, unsure exactly what all of it means, we shouldn't worry. It is when we think we have all the answers that we should worry. But let's try anyway. Let's see if we can come to a little better understanding of what Jesus was talking about. Two things immediately come to mind.

The first is in regard to Jesus' comment about only a few being chosen. Should we take Jesus at face value? Or might he be doing what he always does when he uses forceful language? You see, had Jesus said the opposite, said, "Don't worry about anything. Just keep living the way you've always been living," he would have been giving permission for people to be far less than who God created them to be.

In fact, it would have sounded like he was giving his blessing for mediocrity. But by rattling his listeners a little, by getting them to shed complacency, he was doing them a favor and the world a favor. He knew that spiritual laziness and indifference was the true enemy of someone being "fully alive". And so, he wanted his listeners (and you and me) to always be attentive, always be trying to do our best and be our best, always trying to bring a little more love and hope and mercy into the world. And his powerful and sometimes scary words would help assure that.

The second is in regard to the good and the bad being allowed in to the banquet. That tells us that God saves whomever God wants to save. God calls the shots. God is in charge. And when we try to figure out who is in

God's good graces and who isn't, we run the risk of trying to play God, or of overstepping our bounds by a great margin. (At times the Pharisees and others we see in Scripture were probably guilty of this very thing.) In other words, we can't force God's hand, we can't make God owe us anything, we can't "earn" our way into the banquet (no matter how hard we try or how "good we are). All is grace. All is purely a gift.

And so, let's simply accept the invitation for what it is, an opportunity to live a life beyond our wildest expectations, a life infused with every good thing - mercy, kindness, generosity and love. And we do so not to "earn" a single thing, but to respond in love to the incredible God we have - the God with whom we hope to spend the rest of our earthly lives and eternity too.