

The Raggedy Guest and the Values of God

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 11, 2020. Pastor Meagan's sermon today is on Jesus' parable of the petulant king and the raggedy guest, and how they can wake us up to envision our own communities and conflicts differently.

Readings: [Philippians 4:1-9](#), [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

*** Transcript ***

Is anyone else feeling weary this week? The pandemic is ongoing with no break. We struggle with how to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas this year, knowing that the weather is fast-changing and soon being outside isn't going to be an easy option. And that all seems to be weighing in on these last days. And the tension and anxiety around the upcoming election, and the stark divisions over issues that carry so much importance, certainly don't help.

My family and I have always seen things differently from one another. So many times over the years I've had to remind myself that it is not my job to make sure my family members agree with me, especially when it comes to issues at all related to politics. And in our world today, with so much hard division between one party and the other, so much chaos happening in so many ways, and so much at stake, that's become particularly difficult. And I have to admit, I have not been very good at remembering this of late. Maybe I need to practice Red Light, Green Light when I'm getting into that mindset. It doesn't help that my youngest brother happens to be a committee chairman for the opposite political party from the one that aligns best with my views, and that my dad and I have diametrically opposed sources of news. It is so easy to get focused on particular personalities, specific issues, and get to arguing about statistics or perspectives on things, isn't it? I'm sure I'm not alone in this. Red light!

Once again, thankfully, we find that there really is nothing new under the sun, no problems that God hasn't taught us about, nothing that God hasn't seen before. In our passage from the letter of Paul to the Philippians today, we find that Paul is addressing what we might call political divisions that are happening among the leaders and people of Philippi, 2,000 years ago.

There was a lot at stake for the young church, as they navigated their way through so many challenges and decisions. People argued over a lot of things — who should lead, who could belong, how to practice their faith with integrity with an increasingly diverse community. So we aren't the first to get lost in personalities and fights over particulars, and struggle with how to live out our faith when so much is changing. Paul is definitely speaking to worry, anxiety, and stress, which I think we can all relate to these days.

Thankfully, Paul has some wisdom to offer us, and not surprisingly, his solution brings us right back to what is really important. Paul starts out by counseling Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in Jesus. I've always read this as meaning that we need to agree with one another in everything — be of the same mind — but what jumps out at me today, in this divided world that we're living in, is the phrase “in Jesus.” As this resonates, it dives deeper than surface agreement on a personality or decision, going from sharing opinions to sharing values.

Paul calls the Philippians, and us, back to the God-given values that Jesus embodied for us. And he gets specific. Joy, gentleness, gratitude, truth, honor, justice, purity. Being of the same mind in Jesus doesn't take away our differences, but Paul suggests that it does unite us as we find our common values. And it

starts with rejoicing, and being grateful. Perhaps this is something we can do with our spotlight: rejoice and be grateful.

And then we have the gospel. The religious leaders and Jesus' disciples, like us, are also trying to figure out how to live their lives in faith, to make sense out of what it means to embody the kingdom of God in this world. Jesus offers a very different and perhaps complementary answer from Paul, and as he does so often, Jesus talks in parables. And this week's parable, I have to say, is quite a challenge! What on earth are we to take from this petulant and violent king, the rude people who ignore the king's invitation, and the raggedy guest who gets bound and cast out into proverbial weeping and gnashing of teeth? Jesus is on a mission, these few weeks, to help us see not only the invitation to the joy and abundance of God's kingdom, but our own resistance to the invitation that God offers us so freely.

Starting with the king. He's throwing a party, and no one wants to come. How could they be so rude as to blow off the king?! It's so easy to make things about us isn't it, even when it's about our faith. The king, it seems, has gotten caught up in what others think of them, and is badly offended when they don't get the recognition they think they deserve. When you look at how the king acted though, it's no wonder people blew off his invitation. And it's easy for us too to get off track quickly, when we get caught up in our own agenda, and forget to delight in the community around us and let our gentleness be known to those around us.

And the first round of guests, the ones who don't come? They all have reasons — maybe really good ones, although Jesus suggests otherwise in this case — and the truth is, so do we sometimes. We take for granted the invitation we've been given to community, and ignoring the call to share gratefully in the abundance of God.

And then, there is the second round of guests. These guests are not the first choice of the king, but still they're invited. They accept the invitation and all is well, until one of these last-minute guests has the audacity to show up in the wrong clothes. Often, we judge the guest, taking this as a cautionary tale about the need to dress properly (figuratively speaking) for the heavenly banquet. But theologian Debie Thomas in her blog proposes an alternative reading, and a question: what if this "ragged" guest is actually Jesus? What if the invitation to us today is to realize that it is not God who is judging and critiquing our worthiness, or other people's worthiness, to enter the kingdom, but us?

Maybe today, we can let the absurdity of this image of a king, God, who sets a town on fire because the "worthy" people don't show up at his party, invites the "regular people" only because the important people wouldn't come, and then throws out the guest who doesn't observe protocol — we can let all that wake us up to envision the kingdom, and our own communities and conflicts, differently. To realize that when we demand compliance with arbitrary protocols, we cast out Jesus, the one we most want to welcome. We can dream of an abundant table, in the presence of our enemies, that needs no barriers or requirements because it has enough for everyone. And all who show up are transformed by the grace of that invitation.

This brings us back to Paul, and the conflict among the Philippians. Rejoice, he tells us, first and always. When worry sets in, ask God for what we need with gratitude. Rather than seeking agreement on non-essentials, keep our focus on the values that bring us together as people of God. Truth. Justice. Honor. Jesus, the ragged guest at the feast, may not say anything, but he models for us an unwillingness to give in to the petty arguments and rules, he highlights the injustice of the arbitrary boundaries and barriers, and stands firm in his opposition to a king who clearly cares more about himself than he does about the community around him.

Paul tells us to focus on the values of our faith, to ask God for what we need, and practice gratitude — all pillars of living out our faith, and rest for our weary souls. As you heard from Jesse today, and will hear from Carolyn and others in our Adult Forum later, taking care of ourselves and nurturing our community is the foundation of well-being as people of God. The stress of trying to agree may not disappear, but it lessens. Our worry fades. We have the courage and strength to stand firmly for truth, honor, and justice, in our families, our neighborhoods, workplaces and schools, and the ballot box, led by Jesus the ragged guest. And the promise is that the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ.

Thanks be to God!

*** Keywords ***

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