

October 11/12, 2008
St. John's Lutheran Church
"Faithful Giving"
Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger

The heart of today's parable is this: "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Jesus tells this parable during his last week—in those days between Triumphal Entry and Torturous Cross. His audience is those gathered in the Jerusalem Temple; his target is the group of chief priests, elders of the people, and the Pharisees and they know it. This parable is violent—with the terror of men who seize and murder the slaves sent to invite them to a party. It is violent with the revenge-killing of those murderers and the burning of their whole city. It is violent with the terrifying banishment of an underdressed guest. Jesus' parable is a horror story *until* we understand it in light of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In light of those days, everything changes. On the cross, God-in-Jesus enters into the world of hateful and violent humanity and suffers *for* it. In Jesus, God gets thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God chooses all of us. That's where I believe we must begin as we seek to understand Jesus' parables. Each of us is always invited to the banquet. Our world which so often reeks of hatred and violence is yet being covered with

God's mercy and grace—not because we deserved it or did the right thing or wore the right outfit—but because God so loves the world. God so loves the world, that God suffers for and with it. God wants everyone at the party, a party that has been bought and paid for by Christ Jesus our Lord. The heart of the parable is this: “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

In Jesus' day, if you went out into the main streets, you'd find a lot more people who fell on the side of so-called “bad” than “good.” The rich and righteous didn't hang out on the streets. Servants or slaves did the shopping. And if you weren't one shopping or selling, you were probably begging. The main streets belonged to the working poor and even poorer. The main streets were the domain of those *without* power or prestige. And that's who made up the bulk of the early Christian community. They heard the “Main street” message that all were invited. They knew Christ crucified and resurrected. They knew that it was God's grace—not their own righteousness—that bound them together. They knew that the wedding banquet had already begun, that the kingdom of God had come near, and that even in a violent and hateful world, they could be a part of a community

alive in joy and thanksgiving, gentleness and reconciliation. The church at Philippi was no exception.

Once every three years, we hear this morning's verses from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The ones we probably know best are verses four through nine, beginning with "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice."

Those also get lectionary billing during Advent and Thanksgiving. But not verses two and three. They are heard for ten seconds every three years in our lectionary-abiding churches. And they're the ones that blow me away, because they testify to the radical fellowship of believers that existed just decades after Christ's ministry, a fellowship unimaginable before Jesus' teaching and the unfolding meaning of the cross and resurrection; a fellowship of believers who heard the heart of Jesus' parable!

Turn back to this second reading in your bulletins, and let's re-read verses two and three: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life." Paul's letter is addressed to all the saints at Philippi, with the bishops

and deacons, and in this section a “loyal companion” is specifically addressed.¹ There is something amiss enough between two side-by-side workers with Paul in the Gospel that it merits a public, written call for reconciliation. These two, who struggled beside Paul and Clement, are two of the most forgotten women in the New Testament and in the history of the church. Now, I’ve known many a Lois and Eunice and Phoebe. I know Lydias and Marys and Elizabeths and even a Dorcas. But, Euodia? Syntyche? Have you a met a one? They represent a forgotten tradition of women’s leadership in the earliest churches; they embody the invitation that God in Jesus made to all. They were Gentiles and they were women. Their disagreement was clearly affecting the ministry and work of the church at Philippi. Paul says they “struggled” with him, and this word to struggle or labor in Greek denotes active and vocal participation. Paul calls them “co-workers,” the very same word he uses for the men Aquila and Urbanus as well as the woman Prisca in Romans 16. Paul makes no distinction between himself and others and is ready and willing to call men and women, Jew and Gentile co-workers with him in ministry. Romans 16 (except v. 25-27) is actually *never* read in our lectionary-abiding churches and it, like this passage in Philippians also reveals Jesus’ “Main Street” church in action.

¹ Some scholars believe that Paul wrote many letters to this church and that what we have in our scriptures is a combination of fragments.

Chapter 16 concludes Paul's magnificent letter with greetings to the church in Rome, beginning with a recommendation of the deacon and patron Phoebe, and continuing with a list of twenty-five more acquaintances and co-workers of Paul, including nine more women, one of whom he calls an apostle. Her name was Junia.²

You see, this is the church as it was. These are "facts on the ground." Women and men, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, were sharing in the work of the Gospel. And I'll you what, these details speak volumes about what the early church was about, and instruction found in I Timothy like "let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" just doesn't add up. One wonders where the Gospel went in all of that. Is that what Jesus was teaching? Does that reflect his friendships and encounters with women during his ministry? Does that speak to the reality of the church we see described by Paul himself? Euodia and Syntyche give a glimpse of mutual ministry between unlikely people bound together by the power of the Gospel and the vision of a banquet to which all were invited. The ELCA has, along

² Centuries of tradition have actually obscured this fact, changing her name to Junias, a masculine version of the name, which curiously doesn't even exist as a name from the period while Junia was a common name in the Roman Empire. See Richardson, Peter. "From Apostles to Virgins: Romans 16 and the Roles of Women in the Early Church." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 2 (2, '86) 232-261 and Lampe, Peter. "The Roman Christians of Romans 16." *The Romans Debate*, Karl Donfried, ed. (Hendrickson 1991).

with other Christian traditions, recovered the original impulse of men's and women's full participation in ministry over the past thirty-five years. But, isn't it astounding that so many continue to prevent women from the full range of leadership in Christ's church?

Paul wanted Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord so that their mission and ministry could continue. So that the church could be strong and life-giving...so that the church could support not just ministry in their own place, but abroad as well. And in case you thought I might not actually get to a Stewardship theme today, here goes: the only way a "Main Street" kind of church could exist in Paul's day was if people gave whatever they could, whenever they could, to support the work of the church and their fellow believers. There were patrons of those early communities, working side-by-side with the poor, sharing in the Lord's meal and prayer and service. In this week's chapter of "Giving to God," Mark Allan Powell summarizes the way Paul himself understood stewardship and he calls Paul the "unabashed fundraiser." Paul was especially concerned about providing for the church in Jerusalem because it was especially poor and struggling. There was this multi-region passing of the plate going on for their sake, and Paul saw this offering as a sign of unity among Jesus' followers across

ethnic and cultural traditions.³ If they were going to be a church that reflected Jesus' teaching and God's grace at work in their lives; if they were going to be a church of poor and rich, women and men, Gentile and Jew, those with means would have to pony up, not out of compulsion, but gratitude and joy for the banquet that had already begun, that reflected who Jesus was, and what God wanted them to be.

That is the church we have always been called to be. We at St. John's get to ask ourselves: does our family of faith and do the ministries we support—here, in town, and across the world—reflect Jesus' "Main streets" invitation to all? I am confident that as we look at our commitments, we will say "yes" many, many times. But I'm also sure that we've got a lot more work to do. And that's work I want to be doing with all of you. Amen

³ Powell, Mark Allan. *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Eerdmans 2006), p. 115.