

Pentecost 22a - Proper 23  
St. David's - October 12, 2008

I want to warn all of you before we begin that today's sermon is Rated R. This may not be a good day to have your children sitting with you.

It is not that I lived a sheltered life. After all, I grew up in the 60's. Though my parents did try to shield us from the craziest things going on in that crazy time, it was impossible for us to avoid seeing the many golden calves around us. The 60's were saturated with idols of all kinds, and I regularly had an opportunity to watch people dancing, (and doing lots of other much more bizarre things), around those idols. Of all the great idols of the 60's, there were three that symbolized the whole generation. We might refer to them as the golden calf trinity, sex, drugs and rock and roll. I was regularly exposed to each of them. By the time I was a teenager, we had moved to a nice suburban neighborhood, but it was still impossible to use the restroom in our high school without being overwhelmed by the sickening sweet odor of marijuana. Our church dances fulfilled the rock and roll element of the trinity. Most often, they took the form of a battle of the bands. If you have never experienced a battle of the bands, the battle was not just to see who was better, but also who was loud enough to vibrate your feet off the floor. There are plenty of examples from my life of the third strand in the idol trinity, but one particular event sticks with me to this day. It was after school on an unusually nice spring day in Maryland. We were in the middle of track practice. There I was, looking heavenward, as I gasped for air between wind sprints. Suddenly my eyes focused on the hill above the track. There I saw one of my classmates, the girl of my dreams, in fact, beautiful Sara, the red haired goddess who made my knees weak. I

stood and watched in utter horror, as she peeled off her jeans and laid down in the grass with some long haired hippie freak. When one of my fellow tracksters noticed the same thing, suddenly we regained our strength, and in typical adolescent fashion, we decided to do a cross country run, just happening to choose a path right next to the otherwise engaged couple.

Despite those events however, and others like them, I still felt like a babe in the woods when at the tender age of 16, our English teacher took a half dozen of her most promising students to Columbia University and New York City for a college journalism seminar. I still recall some of the writing techniques I learned during that time, but it was the extra curricular activities of that week that made an indelible impression on my very young, very impressionable mind.

Columbia, like many universities of the day, was rife with protest. I will never forget the tear gas canisters going off around me as I attempted to walk across campus. I will never forget the fear that I felt as I ducked behind those ivy covered walls with idealistic student protestors.

I will also never forget the movie that our beloved English teacher took us to see that week, a film entitled, believe it or not, *About Loving*. It was my first exposure to nudity and sex on a movie screen and I remain shocked to this day that she took us to see it. I will also never forget the Electric Circus, an acid rock club with ear splitting music and no lighting except constantly flashing strobe lights. In every flash of the light, all I saw were wild faces and drugs being passed from one to the other. I tried my best to enculturate myself in the experience, but I hated every moment of it.

My coming of age shock experience was just beginning however. Before it was over, I would watch as my fellow students got so drunk they could not say a sentence and so stoned that they could not get out of bed. I watched them get so sick they could not find the bathroom, much less use it. Then the topper occurred when I walked into our room to find two of my best friends in bed with one another.

It was something neither of them would have ever considered if they had been sober. The shame and guilt from that event haunted them as long as I knew them. It was that night that I vowed to never worship the golden calves of the 60's. I made a commitment right then that sex, drugs and rock and roll would never control me for one instant in my life.

I also remember one other thing from that trip. Mama Leone's. Mama Leone's was THE Italian restaurant to go to, not just in New York City, but the country. The experience was great for a blue collar kid that rarely ever got to go to a restaurant. But what I remember the most about going there was the fact that they had a dress code. I walked into the restaurant in a shirt and a tie, and was refused a seat because I did not have on a suit coat.

It was the most bizarre of juxtapositions. Here I had spent the week experiencing a world that seemed to me to be coming apart at the seams. People were dancing around golden calves everywhere. It was a world of protest, of anger, of violent noise, of emptiness, where people showed no respect for one another and dishonored each other on movie screens and in my hotel room. It scared me and it shocked me to the core. Then, this guy tells me I can't sit down because I don't have a suit jacket. I wanted to

say...maybe I did say, "Are you nuts? Do you have any idea what is going on outside your door? Do you realize there is a Broadway play right up the street where people aren't wearing any clothes? And you are trying to enforce Gentlemen's Quarterly?"

It is from this acknowledged bias that I hear today's Gospel. Today we get the story of a guy getting thrown into the outer darkness because he didn't wear a three piece suit. My immediate reaction to the author of this Gospel can only be, "Are you nuts? Do you have any idea what is going on out there? Can't you see that there is a golden calf on every corner? Do you realize that the entire working class is being raped by the Temple Aristocracy and the Roman leaders? Do you know that women are being treated like slaves and slaves are being treated worse than animals? Have you totally missed the point of the Jesus message? We have real issues to deal with here, and you are giving us a story about people going to hell on a bad clothes wrap?

Now there may be some of you who heard this story and had a quite opposite reaction. If, for example, you are fond of shopping and following all the latest fashion trends so that you will always dress impeccably, you may be saying, Praise Jesus! Finally, a Gospel that tells us that we have to shop! A Gospel that informs us that shopping for clothes is a sacred duty!

I realize how ridiculous all this sounds, but when we approach the text as I did, seeing it only through my own personal teenage angst, or as if it was written to us in our day and time, we can do nothing *but* come up with silly meanings.

Now I realize that most of us do not think we are prone to reading the bible in this fashion. But the truth of the matter is that it is difficult not to do this. Our experiences

color our view of everything, including the biblical text. But it is not just that. Some of our methodologies for studying the bible suggest that we begin by asking what the text is saying to us. This is the case, for example, with what is commonly called African bible study, or more accurately community based bible study. Many of you have taken part in this form of study. It is when you read a text out loud as a group, then focus on the words that “speak to you”, then go back and focus on what the text is saying to you today.

Certainly good things come out of community based bible study. But it is also true that such an approach to the text leads me to hearing today’s Gospel as a story about a God who sets up arbitrary dress codes while Rome burns. It might lead others of you to the conclusion that if we shop at Nieman Marcus, we can stay in the Kingdom of God. I can’t help but believe that this is also a fundamental reason behind the schism mess we find ourselves immersed in today. African leaders in our church were often taught to study this book as if it was written to them.

So if we can agree that my interpretation of this Gospel is just silly, what are we to really make of this profoundly disturbing tale of a two-faced king? Realizing that it was not written to us, our first question might be, where did this story originate? A study of the roots of this story, takes us to Upper Egypt to a mountain called Jabal-al-Tarif, where 150 natural caves are cut into the hillsides. In December of 1945, an Arab peasant made an astonishing discovery in one of those caves. Digging up some of the soft soil there to fertilize his crops, he hit a red earthenware jar. After breaking open the jar, he found thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Though some of that papyrus was often

used to start the family fire in the house, the rest would eventually end up in the Coptic museum in Cairo. What was discovered was a series of Gospels, not the Gospels in our Bible, but different ones called Gnostic or secret knowledge Gospels, texts that were at some point called heretical by the early church. The books were banned and burned, but some thoughtful soul, buried this copy, where they stayed until their discovery in 1945.

Among the Gospels discovered there at Nag Hammadi, was the Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is a sayings Gospel, purported quotes of Jesus. And there, right in that text is a parable that sounds suspiciously like today's.

The Gospel of Thomas version, written much earlier than today's version from Matthew, does not speak of a king, but just a guy preparing a wedding feast. The question in that parable is, "what if you had a party and no one came?" The excuses given in the Thomas version by people not attending the wedding are all economic. The point of this earlier parable seems to be something like, "life in the kingdom of God will be a reversal of the social and cultural values of the dominant class in our culture."

Another version of this parable appears in Luke's Gospel. That version is much more like the Thomas story. The Good News, according to Luke, is that the kingdom of God is a feast in which those abused and rejected in society are invited to God's feast.

When we realize that today's Gospel appears in a different form in two other places, it is much easier to understand what is going on here. Matthew is reinterpreting an older parable for his own place and time. In fact, Matthew's version is not a parable at all. He turns the story into an allegory. The king (God) prepares a feast for his son

(Jesus) and invites his subjects (the Jewish hierarchy) to the banquet. They don't take the king up on the invitation (reject Jesus' message) and actually kill the king's servants (the prophets). The king (God) destroys them (the Jewish hierarchy) and their city (an allusion to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD) and invites others (the Gentiles) to the feast.

Then Matthew adds that last piece about the guest not being properly dressed. This part is not found in the Thomas or Luke version at all. It is apparently a reference to those Gentiles who have joined the new Christian community but are not prepared or are not fit to be in the church, and are thus expelled.

Obviously then, Matthew is not suggesting that God cares more about fashion than sex, drugs and rock and roll. Sorry, but Matthew is also not suggesting that we all need to spend more time shopping for our next outfit. Instead, this is a reminder to those early Gentile Christians that just being a church member is not enough. It was not enough for the Hebrews and it is not enough for you. For Thomas and Luke, this parable was all about welcoming everyone into the kingdom and believing in a God who does the same. Matthew however, uses the same general story to make a totally different point, which sounds something like, "all of you have a great opportunity. Don't blow it."

There also seems to be a warning common to all three stories. Everyone is invited to dinner, but some are too preoccupied with their own affairs to accept the invitation. Put in historical and cultural context, Matthew's Gospel, which sounds at first more than a little troubling, can still have much to say to us today. Our job is to reinterpret for our

space and time, just like Matthew did with the story from the Gospel of Thomas.

This morning, let me offer you one possible interpretation of many possibilities for us here today at St. David's. Like Matthew's early Christian church, we too might start to feel a bit privileged. Now that we are in this beautiful new space, the tendency could be to feel like we have made it to the wedding banquet and all shall be well now and forevermore. But instead, what this building offers us is not a get out of jail free card, not a new wedding robe, but an opportunity. Let's not blow it.

We, like Matthew's community, must keep our eyes on the prize. We need to stay focused on continuing to invite everyone to this wedding. We must remain vigilant in finding those in our culture who are being neglected and dishonored and give them a seat of honor at the wedding. We need to celebrate the opportunity that we have been given, and then we must spread that opportunity to everyone else.

Interpreting this text for today also means that we need to discern who it is in our culture that is the most neglected and dishonored. Who is it that we never invite to the wedding? For me, the most neglected of all in *our* world are not just humans, but all of God's created order. Perhaps the most important Biblical interpretation of this Gospel for our time, is to apply Jesus's uplifting of the outcast and dispossessed, and apply it to all living things on this planet. That is what Matthew's Gospel can and should say to us today. So let us all accept our invitations to the wedding, let us never take those invitations for granted, let us invite everyone else to this same celebration, most especially those not invited by anyone else, be they human or any other living thing. It is time to celebrate the interconnectedness not only of all of God's people, but all of God's

earth. Amen.