

Noticing Tension, Returning to Grace
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Isaiah 25.1, 4-8; Philippians 4.4-9, 13; Matthew 22.1-14

I sometimes share with you the tumultuous relationship between my great-aunt Gladys and great-uncle Arthur. They were married 55 years; until the day he died she referred to him as her first husband. I once asked her if he got on her nerves so much, why did they ever get married. She said, "We were childhood sweethearts. As a child Arthur had charm but it cleared up in adulthood."

She used to say, "If your uncle were a light-bulb he'd only be 10 watts." When they were first married he called Aunt Gladys into the kitchen one day to help him with a puzzle. Aunt Gladys said, 'What's the puzzle supposed to look like?' Uncle Arthur said, 'according to the picture on the box it should be a tiger.' She said, 'Arthur, honey, it's not a puzzle; now put the cereal back in the box.'"

There is tension and conflict in our lives.

Notice today's first reading from Isaiah. Notice how our reading skips from verse 1 to verse 4. The missing verses say, "God you have made the city a heap of devastated ruins; the castle of the insolent is a city no more, never to be rebuilt."

But then, after suggesting that God is vengeful and violent, the writer slips into a very different tone: "You are a refuge to the poor and to the needy...you will provide for ALL peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines...you will wipe away every tear..."

In our anger we sometimes wish for vengeance, for retribution, and yet deep down we suspect that what is truly sacred and life-giving is more generous than that. In the core of our being we know that Compassion will lead to our healing and to the world's.

Death row, mandatory sentencing, deportations, campaigns of shock and awe, blaming the victim, killing the enemy, writing intolerance and discrimination into state constitutions do not contribute to our wholeness or to our joy no matter how much we try to attribute our violent reactions to God's will.

We so want to demonize the other, to exclude or even eliminate those we perceive to be different, and yet we also know that just doesn't sound right, it doesn't feel right, and it doesn't work.

And so we see Isaiah struggling with the tension between wanting to make his adversaries pay or wanting to gloat when they fall and fail, but also knowing in the depths of his being that God is a refuge, a source of goodness for ALL people, the source of compassion that wipes away every tear.

We see the Apostle Paul engaging that same struggle. Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians from prison. He's heard that some people in Philippi have questioned his credentials. He's also heard that a couple of people in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche have been at each others' throats. In the middle of these conflicts, St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always and I'll say it again, Rejoice!"

In the midst of conflict, Paul returns to the simple wisdom that love is a healing force. He speaks up for himself; Paul is no doormat. But he also knows that reconciliation is the higher calling for us; and so he says, "Focus on joy. Pray. Embrace peace. And think about what is good and praiseworthy, not about what stirs conflict or fear or division."

I wish everyone running for public office would reflect on our epistle reading for today.

Paul is giving the Philippians the same message he gave to the Romans. Paul said, ¹⁸"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. ¹⁹Never avenge yourselves...²⁰if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And finally, we see the struggle in our gospel reading today. Matthew is writing about 15 years after Rome has decimated Jerusalem and the holy Temple. He's writing to a community that is oppressed

by an Empire. And Matthew gets angry sometimes, and he's writing to people who are scared and angry as well.

Matthew struggles with his belief that God's love is all-inclusive, and with his parallel desire for the mean people to get theirs'.

He consistently gives examples of God's impartial and generous love. In chapter 8, a Roman, military officer, a symbol of oppression, comes to Jesus for the healing of his "servant." In the context of the story and because of the particular Greek word for servant that Matthew uses in the story, some scholars believe that this Roman Centurion's servant is actually his same gender-lover. And Matthew says that Jesus responds compassionately to that Roman officer and in fact praises his faith.

In chapter 15 Matthew tells the story of a Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus because her daughter is tormented with some mental or physical illness; she doesn't know what is causing the pain. She calls her daughter's malady a demon; but in any case, the daughter is suffering. And yet, Jesus' disciples want Jesus to send this woman away, and Jesus actually does attempt to dismiss her. You see, in Deuteronomy 20 (v. 17), there is an instruction for all Canaanites to be destroyed! Killed! Jesus doesn't take that passage literally (thank goodness), but he has probably heard it so often that his first reaction is to recoil from a Canaanite.

He refers to the poor woman as a dog, probably an ethnic slur used against Canaanites, and the woman says, "Even if I were a dog you'd have pity on me and throw me some scraps from your table; how 'bout treating me with at least as much compassion as you would show a dog?" And Jesus, says, "You're right." He then praises her faith, and the daughter is healed.

You see, Matthew is very honest about the tension between our faith and our human emotions. Romans and Canaanites are the enemies of Matthew's community, but he knows that Jesus could see past all that to the innate goodness of ALL people. And so, we see Matthew struggling with the tension between his own prejudices and his belief in divine love.

That's what's going on in the parable today. Everyone is invited to the banquet. It's for all people. But the religious authorities, the people who hide behind the fundamentals and who mix government with religion for their own power and privilege won't allow everyone to come to the feast. So, Matthew represents religious people who use religion as a weapon as someone who shows up to the party ill attired, that is, with ill intent, and Matthew wants the excluders excluded: tied up and tossed out.

As the gospel progresses, Matthew will come back around to the inclusive "good news" he has expressed in the stories about the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion. It is Matthew, after all, who has told us that Jesus said the whole of scripture amounts to treating others the way we would like to be treated (Matthew 7.12).

And Matthew does end his gospel by having Jesus say we are to go out and baptize, that is, to welcome or include, all people in the name of God.

Today's readings are challenging, but useful. They remind us that we don't always feel sweet and kind and cuddly.

Emotions are complex, and if we are honest, we are going to have all of them: Fear, hope, joy, sorrow, anger, doubt, confusion.

We don't have to deny those emotions; we just need to be willing to observe the tension between the more negative feelings and the "better angels of our nature."

If we deny the tension, we can't make positive changes.

Once we notice the tension, we can choose the higher ground and get back to practicing what we say we believe, which is that every person has sacred value.

How wonderful to see Isaiah and Paul and Matthew all being honest about having those unattractive feelings that we all have; and how reassuring to see that those feelings don't negate our high ideals. We can affirm our ideals and be honest about those times when our attitudes aren't in line with them, and then we can choose to gently return to the healing experience of love and forgiveness.

It's an on-going process. There's no need for guilt for when we fall short of our highest ideals, there's just the need to notice the tension, adjust our attitudes, and get back on track.

The *Tao te Ching*, teaches, "Your enemies are not demons, but human beings like yourself. Don't wish them personal harm and don't rejoice in victory over them. How could we ever...delight in the suffering of humans? If you are forced into battle, go with sorrow and great compassion, as if you were attending a funeral."

It doesn't say we won't have conflicts or enemies; it says that we can confront issues without demonizing the people with whom we disagree, and when there is a conflict, we can make the interior adjustments we need to return to peace.

Isn't that what Isaiah, Paul, and Matthew have done? They have acknowledged the struggles in their lives with people they found to be difficult and then they choose to remember that God will provide a rich banquet for all people...

In the end, the banquet of life is for all people, and when we remember that, we find ourselves experiencing the peace and joy that we deserve and desire, and having experienced it, we have it to share.

We're dedicating this beautiful new chancel today. It's more than attractive, though. It is the place where we offer encouragement where we invite all people to join us on the journey.

This chancel is a symbol of what we believe: that God's banquet is for all people; that divine grace excludes no one for any reason.

In life, we will get angry, scared, confused, but we have this symbol, this monument, this place to remind us of our highest ideals...and because of this, we will always be called back to our best, loving generous selves.

This is the message of grace, and this is the good news. Amen.

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**I acknowledge and rise above the tensions in life.
I return to the good news of grace.
I am hopeful and happy.
I am secure and serene.
All is well.
And so it is!**

"To be what we are and to become what we are capable of becoming is the only end of life."
Robert Louis Stevenson