“Wailing and Gnashing Teeth” by Deborah Sokolove

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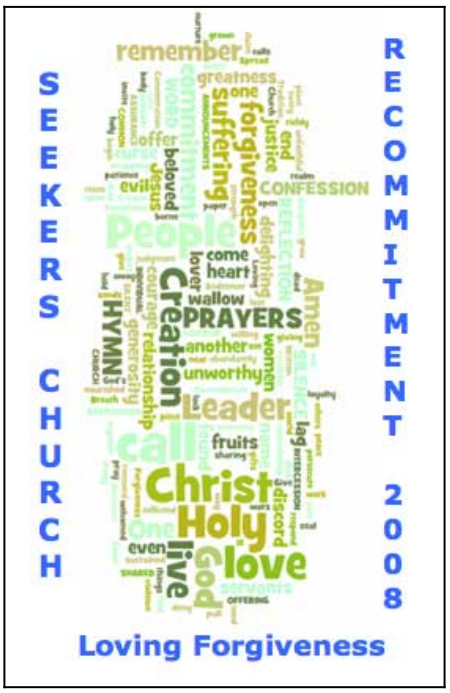

This is a hard Sunday to be preaching. As the crashing stock market tests our faith, as we wonder about our jobs, our retirement income, the very basis of our economy, I find myself face to face with the ways that I have made economic security into a golden calf, trusting more in the size of my paycheck than in God’s promises. Paul’s letter to the Philippians tells us “Rejoice in the Lord always. . . .Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God,” but I am wary. I don’t want to preach cheap grace and easy solutions. I don’t want to preach pie in the sky when you

die. And I don’t want to reassure you or myself that everything will be all right, when I don’t really know that. Many of us will, indeed, weather this economic storm, with nothing more than a little inconvenience. But some people will lose their homes, their jobs, their entire life savings. And many people who already have nothing will continue to bear the cost of an inequitable system from which I, and many of you, benefit.

Jesus knew about that inequitable system. In today’s reading from the Gospel according Matthew, Jesus continues his conversation with the chief priests and elders who have challenged him to reveal the source of his authority to drive the moneychangers out of the Temple precincts, perform miracles, and teach the people about the Realm of Heaven. Instead of answering them directly, Jesus tells a story about a landowner whose first child says the right thing but doesn’t do it, while the second child refuses, but actually does what is needed; about tenant farmers who kill the landowner’s messengers instead of paying their rent; and a king who prepares a wedding feast for his heir.

A story similar to the one in today’s reading shows up in chapter 14 of the Gospel according to Luke, but this time Jesus is at a dinner party given by one of the Pharisees. After telling the guests that it would be better to give parties for people who can’t reciprocate, Jesus tells them

> *“Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of*

oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.

I like Luke's version better. The interpretation is straightforward – the person who is giving the party is God, and the guests who refuse to come are those who do not want to participate in God's egalitarian realm. God gives the party anyway, and anyone who is passing by is welcome, especially if they have problems. In this reading, God is generous and open-hearted, gathering in all who are not normally welcomed in polite society, and inviting them to feast at the heavenly banquet.

But in Matthew's version of the story, things are not so nice. Let's listen again to Matthew 22:

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven ***may be compared*** *to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." But* ***they made fun of it*** *and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged.* ***He sent his troops, destroyed***

> ***those murderers, and burned their city****. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*
>
> *'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." For many are called, but few are chosen.'*

In this version, too, the king may be seen as a stand-in for God, the reluctant guests are those who refuse the message of salvation, and the new guests as the delighted beneficiaries of God's open-handed generosity. But this version is much more violent. Some of the original invitees don't just turn down the invitation, they kill the messengers who bring it. In response, the king has them killed and burns down their city. And what shall we make of that last bit, in which someone is wearing the wrong clothes, and the king has him bound hand and foot and thrown out to a place of wailing and gnashing of teeth? What kind of God is this, anyway?

While the king's response to those who killed his servants **may** be understood as legitimate retribution, too often this parable – and the Luke version, as well – has been taken as a justification for anti-Semitic violence, with the guests who refused the invitation identified with the Jews who rejected Christ, and the new guests seen as the Gentiles who saw him as their savior.

The biggest problem for interpreters, though, has been the ending. Many have struggled to understand why someone should be so harshly punished for wearing the wrong clothes. After all, if the new guests have been brought in from the street, and many of them were very poor, how could they be expected to have clean clothes, let alone special wedding garments?

One answer to this difficulty is to assert that it was the custom in Jesus' day for the host to provide the festive robes for the guests to wear at the feast. Thus, to refuse to wear such a robe would be as rude as the original refusal to attend, an explicit rejection of hospitality. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much historical support for this assertion, and so we are left with an allegorical explanation in which the wedding garment is seen as righteousness, good deeds, or repentance.

But in a paper given at the 2003 conference of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, Marty Aiken suggests another way to understand this passage altogether.[1] I don't know anything about Mr. Aiken except this article, so I don't know how much credence to give to his scholarship other than he sounds like he knows what he is talking about. But even if he is a crank, I find his alternative explanation both evocative and challenging.

What if, Aiken asks, we do not see the king in the parable as God, but as tyrant who would behave exactly as the king in the parable does. After all, the Jews of Jesus' time were very familiar with tyrants, and would have made an immediate connection with the current, local tyrant, Herod.

What if, he suggests, we translate Jesus' introduction not as "the realm of Heaven is like…" but "the realm of Heaven may be compared to…"? Comparison, of course, may easily suggest that two things are quite different. So, perhaps we should think that the realm of Heaven is unlike this violent, arbitrary king who kills his enemies and throws people who don't dress appropriately into the outer darkness.

What supports this idea? Aiken suggests that Jesus' hearers would have remembered how Herod the Great came to be king. Herod, you will recall, is mentioned toward the beginning of Matthew's Gospel in connection with the birth of Jesus and the slaughter of the innocents. He was not a beloved figure.

Herod was an unlikely candidate for the job of King of the Jews, to which position he was appointed by Rome. Herod was Idumaen – from Edom, east of Judea . Idumeans were believed to be descended from Esau, rather than Jacob. Herod was neither a member of the royal family of David nor of the priestly line. Hoping that his intended marriage to a woman of the appropriate lineage would appease the locals, he nevertheless arrived at Jerusalem backed by an army (and, of course, the full authority of Rome). When the Jerusalem elite rejected his claim, Herod took up his throne with violence, setting part of the city ablaze.

With this background in recent memory, Jesus' hearers might have understood the guests who refuse the invitation as the local people who did not accept the illegitimate rule, whether Rome or Herod; and those feasting at the banquet as virtual prisoners, "compelled" – as the text tells us – to come in off

the street and pretend to celebrate, whether they like it or not. In this version of the story, those who are wailing and gnashing their teeth are not to those who are suffering eternal punishment in hell, but rather those who have lost their homes and livelihoods when the city was burned. What then of the poor guest who is thrown out, bound hand and foot because he is not wearing the right clothes? Perhaps this is Jesus, himself, teaching in the Temple that Herod has rebuilt, but unwilling to cover up his true identity with a gaudy, polyester robe.

So, where does that leave us? It was all easier when I was reading Luke. If God is the king in the story, then I am one of the guests at the heavenly banquet, receiving God's lavish, unmerited grace. But if the king is Herod, then the realm of heaven isn't inside the banqueting hall at all, but outside, in that dangerous, unlit place where folks are wailing and gnashing their teeth. Because that's where Jesus ends up. And if I am following him, then that's where I end up, too.

This isn't where I wanted this sermon to go. I really don't like the conclusion this story is leading me to.

When I signed up to preach today, I thought that I would talk about recommitting to loving forgiveness, to being Christ to one another and to the world. Then, when Celebration Circle met upstairs earlier this week, just as the members of Fabrangen Cheder were beginning their Yom Kippur prayers in this very room, I was reminded of the parallels between the spiritual disciplines that Jews observe at this time of year, and those of Seekers as we face into recommitment.

For as long as I can remember, I have known these early fall weeks as a time of self-examination, of repentance, of vowing to do better in the year to come. In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, devout Jews visit or call or write to those whom they have wronged, and ask for forgiveness. Jews are taught that God has not right to forgive us for the harm we have caused others if we do not at least try to make amends. On Rosh Hashanah, it is thought, each person's fate for the coming year is written into the Book of Life. I remember greeting friends and family on that day with the phrase, "May you be inscribed for a good year."

The ten days after Rosh Hashanah are known as the Days of Awe. In the ghettos of Eastern Europe, it was the custom for a synagogue official to go through the streets in the dark hours before dawn, knocking on doors, chanting loudly "O Israel! O holy people! Awake! Rouse yourselves! Get up for the service of the Creator!" The sleepy people would then gather in the synagogue for a service known as Selichot, which means something like "contrition" or "apologies." In this service, the chanted prayers express the anguish of being separated from God and the desire to repent, to change one's behavior and one's heart. For, it is said, with repentance, prayer, and good deeds, the judgment can be reversed.

This period of intense preparation comes to a climax on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – the day on which the Book of Life is sealed for the coming year. Throughout that long day of prayer and fasting, Jews confess communally. Over and over, the cantor chants a list of forty-four ways that we may sin against God and human beings. Here are a few:

> *For the sins we committed before You under duress and willingly.*
> *For the sins we committed before You through having a hard heart.*

For the sins we committed before You through things we blurted out with our lips.
For the sins we committed before You through harsh speech.
For the sins we committed before You through wronging a friend.
For the sins we committed before You by degrading parents and teachers.
For the sins we committed before You by exercising power.
For the sins we committed before You against those who know, and those who do not know.
For the sins we have committed before You through bribery.
For the sins we have committed before You through denial and false promises.
For the sins we have committed before You through negative speech.
For the sins we have committed before You with food and drink.
For the sins we have committed before You by being arrogant.
For the sins we have committed before You by brazenness.
For the sins we have committed before You by refusing to accept responsibility.
For the sins we have committed before You through jealousy.
For the sins we committed before You through baseless hatred.
For the sins we committed before You through confusion of the heart.

And the congregation responds, *selach lanu, mechal lanu, kaper lanu*. For all these things, Holy One, pardon us, forgive us, grant us atonement.

I haven't prayed these verses with other Jews in many years – not since I said "yes" to Jesus' invitation to follow him. Instead, I go on silent retreat in September, where I pray for forgiveness for the sins that I have committed through what I have done and through what I have left undone, and for the

strength and courage to forgive others for what they have done to me. I spend an hour in silence and reflection, listening for God's guidance on whether to commit to another year as a Steward of this church. I write a report weekly to my spiritual advisor. I give a tenth of my income to what I understand as God's work in the world. I pray daily. I forgive my enemies.

Like the Jews who, this week, recited their communal commitments to live more in tune with God's will, next Sunday, we will recommit ourselves communally to Christ through this expression of Christ's Holy Body. If that commitment means anything, then it means that we must sometimes go where we do not want to go. Following Jesus means being willing to recognize illegitimate power; being willing to risk being thrown out of the banqueting hall; being willing to join him outside as he brings love and healing to those who are wailing and gnashing their teeth. Following Jesus means being willing to hear, even when we are in the outer darkness, the promise that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

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[1] Marty Aiken, "The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence: Discerning the Suffering Servant in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet," Colloquium on Violence and Religion, Conference 2003: Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media In Discussion with Christian Theology, June 18 – 21, 2003 at Faculty of Theology, University of Innsbruck/Austria, http://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/events/innsbruck2003_program.html