“Open Invitation”

“Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.”

“We’ll leave the light on for you.”

Every night before she went to bed, Emily Parker turned on the front porch light. It wasn’t merely a ritual or a crime deterrent, but an act that filled her with both hope and sadness. Emily left the front porch light on every night in the hope that this would be the night that her long-lost son Dennis might return home; but even this act of hope was tinged with sadness, because she had been keeping the light on for years without seeing him cross the threshold into the family home. Emily couldn’t even remember the events that began the alienation that resulted in Dennis’ leaving home and cutting off all ties with the family; all that she knew was that he hadn’t been home or been seen by any member of the Parker family for years. Some family members had even written him off, dismissing him as the family’s “black sheep” whose absence was his choice. But Emily couldn’t give up on her son, and she was determined to “leave the light on” as long as it took for Dennis to one day come home.

Many of us may also be “keeping the light on” for people who are absent from our lives. It may be a family member who like Dennis is alienated from the rest of the family, or a friend with whom we had a falling out years ago, or someone who has mysteriously dropped away from us with whom we long to reconnect. Leaving the light on is a sign that no matter how long someone has been absent or how profound the alienation may be, there is an open invitation to return home, that “there’ll always be an empty room waiting for you, an open heart waiting for you.” (David Gates, “It Don’t Matter to Me”).

While some of us may be leaving the light on at our houses, sometimes we may find ourselves “leaving the light on” even though our loved ones are still physically present in our lives. One of the most troubling realities for many people – especially parents who have faithfully raised their children in the Christian faith – is that these loved ones are no longer present with them in God’s house, nor do they share the faith in which they were raised.

“I think that’s a growing question for our people as more of our children and grandchildren choose not to attend church or marry persons of different faiths or no faith whatsoever. So what do we do when it comes to those of our own family who do not respond to the invitation? What do we do when people we love don’t believe as we do?” – David Lose.

This matter of how we are to respond to family members who no longer share our faith, who no longer respond to our Lord’s invitation to “come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28) may explain the tension that permeates today’s Gospel lesson. This is a most disturbing story, in which wedding guests slaughter the king’s messengers, and the king responds by burning their city. Later in the story, a guest who isn’t wearing the proper attire is thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 22:13). It is such a difficult passage that one commentator recommends that preachers “choose one of the other three far more attractive and certainly more edifying passages appointed for this day.” (Lose). But ignoring this reading isn’t a realistic solution, since it is still in the Bible that we consider the inspired Word of God. The question before us is how are we to understand what is happening in this story and what it means for those of us who struggle with the issue of family members who reject the invitation of our Lord in the manner in which certain guests rejected the king’s invitation?
The Parable of the Great Supper is the final item in a series of three judgment parables that are directly addressed to the chief priests and elders as a continuation of Jesus’ response to their challenge: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (21:23). This confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders had probably continued through the time when Matthew wrote his Gospel, so that what we are witnessing is “the low point in an intense family feud [in which] Matthew and his community are caught up in a struggle with their Israelite kin about how to be faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah and, in particular, whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah Israel’s prophets had promised.” (Lose). This explains the opening phrase in our Gospel lesson, in which Matthew reports that “once again Jesus spoke to them in parables” (22:1). The father/son motif binds together all three parables; in the first parable, a father has two sons, who respond in different ways to his command to “go and work in the vineyard today” (21:28). In the second parable, the father sends his son to collect the produce owed to him by his tenants, who in turn “seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (21:39). Jesus ends each of these parables with a stern warning to those who challenged his authority:

- “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” – 21:31.
- “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” – 21:43.

The authorities’ reaction to Jesus’ warnings is understandable: “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.” (21:45-46). But Jesus shows no such fear when he begins his third and harshest parable, in which “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.” (22:2). Both Matthew and Luke include this parable in their respective Gospels, but in Luke’s account the father is not identified as a king but merely as “someone gave a great dinner and invited many” (Luke 14:16); refusing the invitation of a king may have been considered a much more serious breach of protocol. The parable presupposes a two-stage custom according to which an invitation sent well in advance of the banquet is acknowledged and accepted by those invited, who then receive a courtesy reminder on the day of the banquet itself: “he sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet” (22:3). But for reasons that are not explained, those who had committed themselves to the banquet “refused to come.” This was a serious matter: refusal of a king’s invitation, especially in concert suggesting conspiracy, was considered equivalent to rebellion. But this king is patient and does not retaliate, but instead sends a second group of messengers, pleading with his guests that “I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” (22:4). Not only do those invited continue to refuse, but for unknown reasons some of them “seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.” (22:6). The king’s response to this act of violence is equally violent: “He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.” (22:7); the king’s actions echo Isaiah’s warning to Israel of a pending invasion:

- “Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpuses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.” – Isaiah 5:24-25.

Having dealt with the rebellious first group of guests, he king sends out a third group of messengers with an invitation that is no longer restricted to those who accepted the previous invitation, but is extended to all: “Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” (22:9). The gathering is a most inclusive one, for the king’s messengers “gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the
wedding hall was filled with guests.” (22:10). There is no mention of any hesitation or reluctance on the part of these newly-invited guests to accept the king’s invitation; by all accounts, they are grateful to sit at the banquet table with the king.

But just when it seems that the story has a happy ending, there is another strange and disturbing incident: the king “noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe.” (22:11). When the king confronts his guest about his lack of proper attire, “he was speechless” – which is not surprising, since he certainly wasn’t expecting to be invited to a wedding banquet when he left his house that morning. But the king’s response is once again shockingly harsh: “Then the king said to his attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’” (22:13). Matthew’s original audience would have recognized that “weeping and gnashing of teeth” to be an apocalyptic expression of the terror of condemnation at the last judgment:

- “... while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – 8:12.
- “He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – 24:51.
- “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – 25:30.

At this point, it might be tempting to walk away from this parable and focus on one of the kinder readings in today’s lectionary, especially Paul’s words of encouragement to the Philippians. The actions of this king might not be surprising for a despot whose actions are horrific but not uncommon in some parts of the world; but within the context of a parable that is presented within the context of “the kingdom of heaven” make this teaching most disturbing. It is a parable that has been misunderstood and misused by some Christians to drive a wedge between Jews and Christians and even to justify Christian mistreatment of Jews, who are often compared to the ungrateful guests who reject the king’s invitation.

- “It’s a convenient interpretation: we end up snug and cozy, feasting on wine and caviar while the rest of the world burns. At least, as long as we show up at the banquet wearing the right duds. (Acting holy? Speaking the right version of “Christianese”? Not letting our imperfect sides show?)” – Debie Thomas, The Christian Century.

The solution for us may not lie in either merely accepting or rejecting the parable, or trying to explain away its more extreme features. It may lie in the underlying tension that existed in a community in which families no longer shared the same faith. At one time, the Jewish people had a common faith; but when some family members began to confess Jesus Christ as Lord while others rejected a Messiah being the man from Nazareth, tensions understandably developed. Unfortunately, as it too often the case in modern families, these tensions can grow into feuds that can divide and alienate one family member from another and cause rifts that can never be healed. While our context may be very different, the question remains the same: how do we relate to people in our lives who do not share our faith, or who have walked away from the faith we hold so dear?

When people ask me about my religious background, I usually answer that I am a lifelong Lutheran. While that answer is technically correct, there was a time during my teenage years when I slipped away from the Lutheran church. Circumstances involving the resignation of the pastor who had confirmed me cast a negative pall over the church of my childhood, and I soon began to attend a local Baptist church where some of my school friends worshipped. I know that my absence from the family pew hurt my parents and others at St. Peter’s, but to their credit I don’t remember anyone questioning my motives or judging me harshly. In their own way, they “kept the light on” for me, so that when the day came that I decided to come back to the Lutheran Church the
people of that congregation welcomed me back without hesitation or judgment. There was always an open door, and open invitation, and open hearts waiting to welcome me home (and who would one day share in my ordination service at St. Peter’s on June 15, 1983).

Throughout the years of my ministry, I have experienced the heartache of people who I have served walking out of my life and the life of my congregation. Sometimes it may be in anger over a disagreement they have had with me or with the church; more often, they quietly slip away without any notice or explanation. I must admit that this has caused my much distress, and it is sometimes easy to cast judgment upon such people as “C & E” (Christmas and Easter) Christians or people who come to the church merely to “hatch, match, and dispatch” (baptism, marriage, funerals). But I am reminded that as my home congregation left the door open for me to return, I need to keep the light on and the invitation open whenever someone is ready to come home. I need to remember the good news that is in the midst of this admittedly harsh parable, that “God invites all, good and bad (Mt. 22:10), because God is a God of expansive love and radical inclusiveness.” (Lose). We must not let the harshness of this story (which again may be a reflection of the pain that the church of Matthew’s day was experiencing) from preventing us to hear the grace that is at the heart of the gospel, that “God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17). Because we believe in a God of steadfast love (hesed) who never gives up on the people God loves, we know that no matter how far we have strayed or how long we have been away that God’s open invitation remains, because the steadfast love of God “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

“I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace?

Dennis hasn’t returned home yet, but Emily hasn’t given up. She still leaves the porch light on every night, and she still says a prayer for him every night before she goes to sleep. She has no idea where he is, how he is doing, or if there is anyone with whom he is sharing his life. What she does know is that he is always a child of God and that God is with him always; and because God hasn’t given up on Dennis, neither will she.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has called us as his Church to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16). Even as we look at the empty spaces where our loved ones used to be, may God give us the strength to keep the light on, keep the door open, keep the invitation steadfast so that everyone may know that God hasn’t given up on them – and neither have we. Amen.