



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Accepting the Invitation**

**By the Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

It is an odd thing to be presented with today's collection of lessons and try to make sense of them. The reading from Philippians is one of my favorites; it was read by my son at my ordination. It is full of comfort and hope and promise. And then there's the parable from today's Gospel which is a real puzzler. It isn't heart-warming like the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. It is a very harsh allegory that more likely reflects the circumstance of the church to which Matthew was writing than the kind of thing that Jesus usually said. As we have it, probably missing some cultural information, it sounds awful – dragging some poor guy in off the street, then complaining that he isn't dressed right and consigning him to the place of the gnashing of teeth. How on earth does that fit with "Rejoice in the Lord always?" We'll get back to this.

The story of the golden calf has always been a curious one for me. The Israelites response to Moses' absence while he's up on Mt. Sinai conversing with God seems bizarre to my 21<sup>st</sup> century mind. But to someone who had been raised in Egypt during the time of the Pharaohs, it makes sense. The god Ra, the father of all Egyptian gods is thought to have been born in the morning as a golden calf, and growing into a bull by day. By making for themselves such an idol, the people were rejecting the saving work of Yahweh, disregarding all that had been done to bring them out of slavery and seeking to return to what was familiar. You can understand God's response to such faithlessness.

But I read something enlightening this week. Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, ended last night a sunset. It marked the end of the 10 day period known as the Days of Awe, during which Jews seek out those that they have wronged in the past year, ask for forgiveness and work toward reconciliation. Then the day of Yom Kippur is spent in fasting and rigorous prayer for the mending of their relationship with God. It all sounds very serious and somber but Yom Kippur is considered the most joyous day because it commemorates God's forgiveness for the people's faithlessness and pursuit of idols exemplified by the golden calf. Instead of being left to fend for themselves in the desert, the people are given the Ten Commandments and their life with God begins anew. So this story from Exodus and Yom Kippur are reminders of God's eternal love, patience and forgiveness. Rejoice in the Lord always!

So let's come back to this seemingly mercurial King trying to throw a party. Here's a little background on this passage. First of all, it is an adaptation of a true parable found in Luke, a parable is defined as "a narrative of imagined events used to illustrate moral or spiritual truths." (The Oxford Dictionary) Matthew has taken the banquet parable and turned it into an allegory – a story told through symbolic events and characters. Here Matthew is telling the story of the history of salvation and the banquet is God's goal for us all. James Liggett is the rector of St. Nicholas' Church in Midland, TX. I read his excellent sermon on this passage in which he points out; "Since it's an allegory and not a parable,

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we don't need to bother too much about whether the details of the thing make sense the way they do with regular parables. So, for example, we don't need to worry about how the king keeps dinner warm while he makes war against the first set of invited guests, destroys their city, and then has the banquet in that same city on pretty much the same day. That sort of thing is no problem in an allegory."

As Matthew tells this story, the original guest list is Israel, the slaves who deliver the invitations are the OT prophets many of whom were beaten and killed. The second set of slaves who are sent out to invite "everyone" are the apostles and the early church. Those who were gathered for the banquet included "the good and the bad." Matthew and everyone who has been a part of the church since his day, knows that the church is made up of "the good and the bad" the sincere and the not-so-sincere, the committed and the casual, those who live for others and those who live for themselves.

Another important piece of information is found in the ancient Jewish custom of providing every wedding guest with a robe so that all were equal and equally welcome. The robe was a symbol by which guests became participants in the wedding which itself symbolizes union and wholeness. Now this becomes clear...the man in the spotlight has accepted the invitation but has refused to wear his robe. He is there but his not ready for the selflessness that is a hallmark of the Body of Christ. So he was pitched out, from the brightness of the well lit banquet hall and left to stand outside, where it was cold and dark. Did he weep and gnash his teeth in regret – probably. Was his regret simply for missing out on the food and the warmth or was it a dawning awareness of something worth so much more?

We are left to wonder if the King will leave him there. Perhaps he will wait a while and at sometime offer another invitation. That is God's way. We are allowed to say "no, thank you" but God doesn't take that as our final word. God is not deterred by our refusal but patiently waits and issues the invitation at a later time. The wedding garment we'll be given is beautifully described by the words of Philippians looks like this, "Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and excellent" Put it on and "let your gentleness be known to everyone!" Again, I will say Rejoice!

So, besides being lots of cool Bible study – what does this have to do with us today? The Israelites are not the only ones to turn from the life that God offers us. I was struck this week by a comparison of the golden bull calf and another bull – the one proudly standing and snorting on Wall Street. This idol represents something that has seduced our minds and hearts and our economy. The financial mess, driven by greed and the inequality that is raging through our nation is hurting God's people. Unbridled capitalism is not the way to the banquet hall. Please do not hear this as an endorsement of the crowds gathering around the country in protest. That is not what I am talking about. We have to start with our own idolatry and really look at how we think about money. We cannot put it in a separate place, apart from our faith and be spiritually healthy. The fact that money is so hard to talk about tells me that it has been given more influence and power in our lives than is good for us. This is important now precisely because these are scary economic times. In such days it is tempting to put our faith in the things that the world holds dear.

As always God takes the times when we are disquieted to call us into deeper relationship, forgiving us for our anxiety and the idols that look like security. The banquet to which we are invited is a feast of abundance where we are given the robe of fearless generosity, so needed in these times. Living in faith and expecting abundance undoes the fear of scarcity, melts the golden idol and we are free to enjoy God's invitation.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice!

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