

Sermon: 'Comfort'

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

15 October 2017

Based on **Psalm 23; Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14**

Today's Gospel reading includes the third of three parables Jesus told in response to the chief priests and elders, who challenged his authority when he cleared out the money changers from the Temple, healed some blind and lame people in the Temple, and taught people – in the Temple. Those were their grievances.

With each parable he tells in reply, Jesus amps it up a bit: the first parable was about a man who had two sons; the second, about a landowner, with one son; and now, about a king, with a son who is about to get married. The level of violence increases too, and the parables get more and more abstract and surreal. Who could foresee that the bearer of an invitation to a wedding banquet would be seized, maltreated, and then killed?

Three weeks ago, we quoted Clarence Jordan, a farmer and New Testament Greek scholar, who said, 'Whenever Jesus told a parable, he lit a stick of dynamite and covered it with a story.' Today, you can almost hear the fuse burning down.

The previously-mentioned seizing, maltreating, and killing is quickly followed with retribution and destruction. But the banquet went on. Even when one of the newly-invited guests was bound hand and foot and thrown into the *outer darkness*, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth, the wedding party went on.

It's hard to discern a loving God in this reading. Where is the exalted LORD of hosts from Isaiah 25, or the shepherd in Psalm 23 who will lead us to still waters and restore our souls? Why would the king call the unfortunate guest, 'Friend,' just before he has him thrown out?

Of those who had originally been invited to the banquet, a few made light of it and went away and that's okay; weddings aren't for everyone. But the rest proved to be evil murderers. That's hard to imagine even for the first century. And this enraged the king, who immediately took his revenge. Not quite an eye for an eye either, because he took the extra step of burning their city.

If this is how people behave when they don't want to attend a *wedding banquet*, can there be any hope for humanity? There has to be a message behind this portion of the parable, and it might be this: When we walk away from God and thus from God's laws and God's grace, look at what happens: we lose our ability to treat each other with kindness and respect, and we begin to surround ourselves with poor models.

But the wedding was still on, so the king's servants hit the streets and gathered in some random people, both good and bad; not elites, just regular people minding their own business. And, ready or not, these new guests all came to the banquet.

So some are in the darkness, and some are attending the banquet, which somewhat reflects what we see going on around us today. We live in interesting times, as Confucius once said, and he meant it as a curse.

It feels like hardly a day goes by without one person threatening to cast others into a figurative outer darkness. Bad behavior draws better television ratings, it seems, which says something about us too. Maybe we're too accepting of 'it is what it is.'

But when we allow a particular situation to go from bad to worse, what does that say about us as a society and as a civilization?

The situation I have in mind is Puerto Rico, post-hurricanes. According to the internet, 'Puerto Rico' is Spanish for 'Rich Port,' which is ironic, considering the island is \$72 billion in the hole as of last week.¹

The New York Times reported that, as of October 10, 84% of Puerto Rico is without power and 67% of their cell phone towers are down. Bear in mind that the island wasn't at 100% *before* the hurricanes hit, but it wasn't this bad.

Raul Pereda, CEO of Pratt & Whitney Power Systems, which is owned by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, said that his company would like to help restore power to Puerto Rico. He said, 'They are in a tough financial situation. [...] We are going to try and be flexible. We are obviously running a business but we also are looking for an opportunity to help.' He believes that it will take approximately six months to fully restore power to the island.

According to a November 2016 report² published by Synapse Energy, a Massachusetts-based energy consulting firm, it was a combination of many things that have left Puerto Rico's electrical system 'in a state of crisis.' The authors wrote that 'It is

difficult to overstate the level of disrepair or operational neglect at PREPA's generation facilities. Numerous reports, both internal and external, talk of multiple cascading events, simple failures that blossom into crises, staff shortages and in some cases, staff incompetence. PREPA's system today appears to be *running on fumes* and in our opinion desperately requires an infusion of capital – monetary, human, and intellectual – to restore a functional utility.' That was almost a year ago, before the hurricanes blew everything down.

Raul Pereda said that many companies may be skeptical about doing business in Puerto Rico because of its massive debt load. This past July, PREPA³ itself filed for bankruptcy with \$9 billion in debt. Their ability to pay for the rebuild is certainly in question. How did it get like this? We don't know the details, but it seems as if the people of Puerto Rico have been had. Puerto Rico might never get out of this hole, so why did the government keep digging?

Pereda rightly expresses concern about getting paid if he decides to help rebuild the island, but on the other hand, Mitsubishi is projecting a net income for this year of about \$900 billion.⁴ Given the creative nature of financial engineering, which is more important, at the human level, at this moment: an island full of destitute people, or a few billion dollars? Can anyone shift their mindset in order to get the work done first, and determine the financials later?

So, who has been cast out here? Who is not ready? Puerto Rico is in literal darkness, but perhaps it is Puerto Rico's government, and others, who are in the metaphorical darkness, given the island's history of debt and mismanagement?

Our Puritan ancestors believed that all people, as God's children, are sacred by nature. This sanctity implies a basic right to fairness and respect, something that is lacking today both *in* Puerto Rico and *for* Puerto Rico.

The kingdom of heaven – a place where we would all like to go – is primarily about the future, but it's also here right now, all around us. Jesus said, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son,' full stop. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a generous king who loves his son. How would we respond to an invitation to enter such a kingdom?

Jesus also said, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’ In fact, *all* are called but not all accept the invitation, so ‘few are *chosen*’ because all are called. All have the chance to share in the kingdom.

Isaiah praises the LORD of hosts who makes for all peoples a feast of rich food and clear wines. Matthew compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who gave a wedding banquet. In Psalm 23, the psalmist finds comfort in the LORD’S guidance and leadership, in the LORD’S goodness and mercy.

Once cast out, can a person come back from the outer darkness? We say yes, even if they’re bound hand and foot, through repentance in turning back to God, and through God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Can Puerto Rico come back from this disaster? Again, we say yes, but not without a return from the darkness of those who can best effect the rebuilding, and not without a recalibration of how the island is financed and governed. Can all the other Puerto Ricos in the world also find still waters and green pastures? Again, yes, and we as a civilization must continue to do what we can to help them all get to the banquet.

So how can we help? For starters, prayer works. We can also speak up for Puerto Rico with our own elected officials who might appreciate hearing from the faith community. Keeping focus on their situation is the least we can do.

The good shepherd did everything possible to find just one lost sheep. The LORD has prepared a Table for all who are willing to come, and there’s plenty of room. The banquet goes on.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/2017/10/10/puerto-rico-crisis-full-power-restoration-will-take-6-months.html>;

² <http://energia.pr.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Expert-Report-Revenue-Requirements-Fisher-and-Horowitz-Revised-20161123.pdf>

³ Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, in Spanish: Autoridad de Energía Eléctrica (AEE)

⁴ <http://www.mhi.com/finance/library/result/>