

Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA
Synod Online Worship Service
19th Sunday after Pentecost
11 October 2020

Beloved, all: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

More often than not, the kingdom of God is portrayed as a party, a banquet, a celebration. Those who aren't at the party generally choose not to come for their own reasons. They are not locked out; they are invited guests. In our Gospel reading that is precisely the case – they are invited, welcomed guests, and still they choose not to come. They are like the older brother in Prodigal Sons, who refuses to come into the party because he doesn't want to be in the same room with his sinful brother, who won't dignify the Father's gracious generosity. God's forgiveness and lavish generosity is the main theme of so many of the familiar parables of Jesus.

When the invited guests can't, or won't or who are "unwilling" to come, the doors are thrown open to all. The doors to the kingdom are open: Come on in and be welcome. Even those whom we have named "unrighteous can come in" – eat, drink, serve, love, pray... The the parable shifts from judgment to grace. The kin-dom we share in Christ is for everyone. My colleague, Bishop Mike Rinehart calls it "the church as a *corpus mixtum*." Wheat and tares. Tax collectors and Levites. Pharisees and prostitutes. The appointed ones didn't get the job done, so now the doors are open. Just as anyone who is willing to work in the vineyard is welcome, regardless of the hour, likewise, all who are willing to celebrate in the feast are welcome. Come one, come all!

This new community in Christ will not be built around purity, but instead around faith in Christ and his coming kingdom. It will be a community of those who fall short of the law, fall short of God's righteousness, but who trust in God's mercy nevertheless. This new community will be marked by love, not by moral superiority.

Still, be mindful, if you're not wearing a wedding garment, you'll get thrown out. Good news though: The host, the king, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will provide one for you, for free, since most people can't afford one (just like most people today don't own a tux). You needn't provide your own robe of righteousness, you only need wear the one given to you. Don't get caught without the robe of mercy and grace. Beware if you think you can get by with the dirty rags of your own righteousness. They won't do. You're likely to get thrown out on your... Well, you know.

As I crisscross Delaware and Maryland to be with and among the blessed people of our synod, a common experience I have is of meeting folks who believe and want their churches to be the most welcoming places, though that desire doesn't always meet up with the reality. In the midst of difficult conversations, the question will be posed, "Who is welcome at this church?" "Everyone!" someone will inevitably reply. "Really?" And the group looks around, realizes the homogeneity of that space, and concedes that, while they'd like it to be true, it probably isn't entirely.

Who is welcome at your church? Who is socially qualified? Unqualified? Who is theologically appropriate? Who is good enough? Are you ready to throw open the doors to those that some will call riff raff, and invite them to join the dance? How will you do that? Who will invite them? Are you inviting them to a ritual on Sunday morning, or to be part of God's transformation of the world? Pro tip: They're more interested in the latter, but if they engage, they'll come to recognize how much they need the former.

How might we engage those outside our churches in what God is doing in the world, without expecting them to believe everything right away, or without a predatory urgency for them to join and become card-carrying members?

What if the pattern of our life together shifted from making members to engaging entire communities around life-affirming, kingdom-focused, Spirit-breathed transformation efforts? Wow! Lives changed in time, and for eternity.

But beware, when we make those kinds of commitments – it's not just the people around us who change, we change, too. Some would say that the church conforms too much to the culture, but I would suggest that my experience is that the church becomes so much a part of the community, that we are collaborators with others in transforming the culture – coming closer and closer to being true disciples of Jesus, not simply members of the local church.

As the pandemic runs its course and we start taking those tentative steps forward, we will rediscover what it means to be church for this day and age. Our Gospel suggests that we start by throwing open the doors, beloved. If the self-righteous don't want to come to your party, I guarantee there are plenty of others who will, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Rev. William (Bill) Gohl, Jr., Bishop
Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA