

In his 2001 book, *Behold I Do a New Thing*, sociologist Dr. Kirk Hadaway encouraged readers to reconsider the elements of Christian communities, to look at their churches with a fresh eye, and to focus on an important but often-missed purpose of every congregation: to transform lives with and through the love of Jesus Christ. Hadaway's book was like a drink of water for thirsty congregations that were beginning to feel the impact of declining membership, recognizing the need to do something about it, but not sure what that "something" might be.

One of the processes Hadaway suggests is "wild card brainstorming." In it, groups or institutions seeking a fresh way to approach their current circumstances will go to a dictionary or encyclopedia, point to a word and then try to connect their situation to that word. Today's lessons seem almost like someone used the wild card process to select them. From Exodus we hear of a stiff-necked people, a golden calf, and an angry God. Matthew's Gospel gives us Jesus' parable about a wedding banquet that failed to meet the hopes and expectations of everyone connected with it and resulted in an unsuspecting guest being thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, as Matthew likes to say. And in between these two rather grim lessons, we have Paul reassuring us that all will be well. We can almost hear him singing, "Don't worry! Be happy!" He's right, of course. God is good—all the time. Even in dire circumstances and even in bleak lessons, God is good. We just have to persevere to be both open and diligent in finding God's grace wherever we are!

The Israelites had the same problem; that is, trying to find God's grace where they were. They were impatient and anxious. God was taking care of their needs, and God spoke to them through Moses, but that wasn't enough for them. Moses delays coming down from the mountain and his visit with God, leaving Aaron in charge. As we know, the Israelites are impatient and unhappy, and soon Aaron is confronted by an angry mob that wants action now—right this minute! He has two choices, but both are risky. If he honors God, he'll face the wrath of this crowd. If he does what they want him to do, he'll face the wrath of God. Could Aaron be having doubts of his own? Could it be that he, too, is uncomfortable with this God-to-Moses-to the Israelites triangle? Whatever the reason, Aaron concedes and casts an image for the Israelites to worship, a calf made from the golden earrings given them by the Egyptians at the beginning of the wilderness exile.

God calls the Israelites stiff-necked. If you've ever had a stiff neck, you know it's a miserable situation that prevents you from moving without discomfort. It may be related to something stressful in our lives, something that causes tension or anxiety. In *The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox says that the biblical stiff neck comes from trying to put a yoke on an ox that doesn't want to be hitched up. That ox can make it very hard to put the yoke on, just like people who resist something they don't want to do. It appears to God that these Israelites don't want to work with God, and God has had quite enough of that. He tells Moses to leave him alone while he decides what to do with them. But when Moses intervenes, God cools off, and disaster is averted.

In Jesus' parable, the wedding guest is not so lucky. This story may evoke a special empathy from anyone who has planned a big party and requested a response from the invitees. The king has spared no expense to give his son a beautiful feast, an elaborate party. He made every effort to honor his son by having the banquet hall full of guests, even sending his servants to remind and entice the invited guests when it's time to come. But those guests just don't seem interested in being there. The parable says the king was enraged and that must be true. But those of us who have given a party that people didn't attend also know the hurt feelings that prevail when we feel like we've been snubbed or rejected. None of us, however, would resort to the king's next step. It would be an unimaginable last resort for us to invite guests we don't know, just as a way to fill the place up. Hearing that the king invited people from the street, both good people and bad, is hopeful

news for us. It's reassuring to know that the kingdom of heaven will be inclusive. But the next part of the story stops us cold: This guest who was probably minding his own business when he was pulled in off the street, is rebuked then sent off to eternal damnation for wearing the wrong thing.

Interpreters have struggled with this passage for centuries. Augustine believed the missing wedding garment was love. Martin Luther believed it was faith. John Calvin believed it was both faith and works. The early church interpreted it to be the baptismal robe. I wonder if it could be our joyful acceptance of God's gift of Jesus Christ and the personal changes we're compelled to make in order to be worthy of that gift. Whatever it means, we should remember that Matthew was writing to a specific audience, here reminding the Gentiles that salvation wasn't guaranteed for them any more than it was for the Jews. We're reminded that salvation isn't guaranteed for us either.

If we accept the apparent and quick interpretations of these passages, both the Old Testament tale of the stiff-necked people and the wrathful God, and also the New Testament parable of the insulted king and the unprepared wedding guest—if we accept their evident meaning without looking any further, we may be denying a really important aspect of both stories. Relationship. Not just relationship, but what we want from it. And not just what we want from relationship with God, but also what God wants from relationship with each of us.

The Israelites wanted assurance of God's presence in their lives. They wanted concrete, tangible evidence of God. God, as the father of the bridegroom in this parable, was seeking assurance that the wedding guest was prepared to accept the gracious invitation extended to him. God wanted concrete, tangible evidence the banquet wouldn't be held in vain. We want concrete, tangible evidence of God. God wants from us assurance that we are prepared, willing to be God's guests at a party given in honor of God's own son, Jesus Christ. And Paul reminds us that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus." Don't worry. Be happy. Be transformed by the love of Christ.

Well. It just isn't always that easy for all of us. Sometimes that happiness, that peace that passes all understanding seems to elude us—no matter how badly we want it. Some of us will have to overcome our own misgivings and self-doubts before we can be transformed. We may have to trade in our belief in a wrathful God, an angry old man who says "No. You just aren't good enough," for the one that says "yes, I accept you as you are." Perhaps we have to see the wedding robe as our own belief in ourselves. Perhaps we have to discard the sackcloth that scratches our self-inflicted wounds of guilt and unworthiness for the soft white robe of God's grace, the assurance that enfolds us in the knowledge that each one of us is a beloved child of God.

And what about the part where we see God? A God who is concrete and tangible? Kirk Hadaway says we only believe in what we can see. That's why we have each other. To witness to one another about God's saving grace in our own lives, to accept each other as we are, to faithfully help each other guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus through each other. And it's also why we have the Eucharist, the gifts of Christ's body and blood to remind us that Christ died for us, and of his invitation to partake of them in his memory. That's an invitation that we just can't turn down.

As Alyce McKenzie wrote in a reflection on today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians, "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding is guarding your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus right now. Whether you feel this at an emotional level or not, this is the truth. So get in the habit of constant prayer, and you will come more and more into contact with this gift of peace. Do not beat yourself up that you have anxious thoughts. This is our common human tendency. Do not suppose, like the Stoics, that you can banish anxiety through self-mastery and be indifferent to the ups and downs of life. Only the Peace of God in Jesus Christ can master your anxieties."

In God's peace and in the knowledge that you are a beloved child of God, there is always transformation. May God's peace and love be with you, now and always. *Amen.*