

We had something happen Wednesday night at Walking Worship that has never happened before. I think, actually, when we first started Walking Worship this was the sort of thing that would happen a lot, but it never did and so we've comfortably settled into a groove of what our group does, and what happens around us just kind of happens and we don't necessarily pay attention one way or the other. Well, Wednesday night, it happened. We had made our third stop and had read our scripture text for the night, Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones, God's breath moving over what seems dead and long gone and breathing new, abundant life into them, and I was sharing a little bit of a reflection on it, about the Holy Spirit moving through those things which seem dormant within us, that God can create new beginnings out of basically anything, that there is nothing so hopeless that God can't find a way to inject life into, just sometimes in unexpected ways.

Out of the corner of my eye, I had realized a woman had stopped on the other side of the trail, and it seemed like she was listening, but I wasn't sure if she might have just stopped to stretch or catch her breath. We finished and started to move along, and she stopped us. She said she had walked past us, and something told her to turn around, to go back, to listen, and so she did. This woman had tears rolling down her cheeks, talking about how the Holy Spirit moves and how we fight so hard against listening

to God, but sometimes we just have to, and we all have to keep striving forward with what we're doing, and being attentive to where God is moving in the world. The conversation couldn't have been more than five minutes long, but it was laden down with the presence of God, right there in the middle of the woods, with people running in between us, paying us no attention whatsoever. By the end of it, when we had all moved our separate ways, there were a lot of tears in our eyes and just this kind of awestruck moment that things like this *can* happen. Somehow, some way, the Holy Spirit blows through and sweeps us off our feet and knocks the air out of our lungs, usually when we were least expecting it, and usually when we need it most. Sometimes, God simply stands there with an invitation, to turn around, to go back, to go forward, to enter, to exit, to live, to breathe, but it ends up being all about what we do with that invitation.

This parable stands as about one of the most maddening parables in all of the gospels. So maddening in fact that even my Lutheran study Bible says in the margins that it's entirely puzzling and best left without an explanation. Suppppper helpful for preachers who have to come up with some sort of explanation. But anyway, that's my issue, not yours. So let's dive in and figure it out anyway. Our setting hasn't changed, there stands Jesus in the middle of the Temple still poking the bear at the Chief Priests,

because why make your point about their failures once if you can make them three times? So, here we go with another parable...this time about a wedding feast that has been laid out by a king, and once again, the minds of the crowds should be kicking, like ooo yeah, God talks about setting banquet feasts before God's people all the time in scripture. God talks about abundance and fine wines and enough food for all to be fed on the top of God's mountain. There are all sorts of images of heavenly banquets and mountaintop wedding feasts and frankly just a good ole time with God and God's people with scripture, so it would make sense to them, where they think Jesus is going here.

And honestly, the parable makes sense up to that point. God has opened up a wedding feast and invited those you would *expect* to join, to come on in, and they have just shrugged their shoulders and been like nah, we're good. We got other business to tend to. They treat the invitation like it's nothing. So, God flings wide the doors and says all are welcome, everyone can come in, good, bad, indifferent, everyone is welcome to come on and party because that's what the kingdom of God looks like now, with the ushering in of Jesus as the Messiah, a kingdom which is not only overflowing with abundance for all, but that is open to every last person on earth, where grace flows freely and love is the word of the day.

But then...everything gets a little messy. Messages about wedding robes and weeping and gnashing of teeth and suddenly the king has also turned into a burn the city down murderer. Some of that can be muddled through...the wedding robes for instance. In Ancient Israel, when weddings were thrown, the host provided all the guests with a wedding robe, basically creating an atmosphere of equality, where no one can lord their status over another, all can simply kick back and enjoy the party without having to compare whether someone's shoes are nicer or their jewelry bigger. The wedding robe was the great equalizer in order to diffuse any tension or competition in the middle of a what is supposed to just be a celebration. So, this whole thing about the guy not being in a wedding robe, it's not because he came to the party unprepared, it's because he refused to wear what was offered to him. He wanted to stand out, he wanted to make a point, he wanted to be acknowledged for whatever reason, and doesn't want to play by the rules. He's happy to have gotten the invitation, but now wants to do whatever he wants. It's a bit of the Ancient Israel equivalent to I'll wear my mask to get into the store, but then tug it down or take it off once I'm out of view because I want to do my own thing.

Y'all, I don't know what to do with the king burning down the city or kicking this guy out to the outskirts of the city where the dogs scrounge

through garbage and gnash their teeth. I don't know what to do with the many are called but few are chosen. It's as simple as that. Honestly, I kind of want to chalk it up to cryptic Jesus who has maybe been riding the parable train so long while being frustrated with the Chief Priests that he's gotten a bit angsty and rambly.

Because here's what we can work with...God has blown open the doors to the kingdom and extended an invitation to every last person we can imagine. This is like Willy Wonka, but *everyone* gets a golden ticket. There are no requirements for entry, there are no expectations, but simply come as you are, messy and complicated and lost and broken and weird and wild and maybe only mildly having a clue. And most days we want to be good with that, but sometimes...sometimes...a lot of things happen. Sometimes we are the people who make light of that invitation. Like oh yeah, God thanks, and I see that the kingdom looks *super awesome*, but I've got other things to tend to, better opportunities, and I just don't really have the time to do the whole kingdom thing, I'll check back in with you later. We think since the kingdom will always be there we can pick it up and set it down whenever it's convenient, rather than recognizing that this invitation from God is a lifetime invitation to *life*, to life centered around grace and love and care for one another. But frankly, sometimes we just don't have time for that.

And other times, we're happy for the invitation, but then we look around and who else has been invited to the party and we're like hard pass, exiting left, because I have no desire to party with *those people*. We very much want to dictate the guest list to the kingdom of heaven, and if God has the audacity to invite others that we think are less than worthy or are undeserving then we want nothing to do with the party. We limit our own access to the kingdom out of sheer angst that God would dare to love people we don't. We remove ourselves just a little bit from the kingdom when we get frustrated that God doesn't seem to have the same caveats and expectations that we do. God says welcome to the party, come on in, and live, and we take one look around the room, and back out in disgust like, "You expect me to associate with *them*?" And suddenly, we're not only judging our siblings for who they are, but judging God for being loving and wildly inviting.

And then there are times where we take the invitation and we're down with the guest list, as long as we get to be singled out as more important or special or better than everyone else. We look around and we say ok, we can hang with these people as long as everyone acknowledges that I'm at least a smidge better than they are. I mean my sins aren't as bad as *theirs*, and surely God must love *me* a little bit more, and can we all just bask in my

excellence for a little bit, because if I'm going to be here, I'm not going to stoop to putting myself on the same level as these people I can tolerate but don't want to be on par with.

But here's what holds...the invitation remains...the kingdom stays right where it is...God's love remains as vast and all-encompassing and abundant as ever, and it's never going to stop. It's never going to stop even if we make light of it or reject those who are already inside or try to place ourselves above one another. God's going to keep standing outside the door of the kingdom going come on in, your place is here, abundant love is yours. The Holy Spirit is going to keep blowing through our lives and beckoning to us, calling to us when we least expect it, trying to usher us into the party, back into the party, to stay at the party. We aren't always ready for the invitation, sometimes we feel that wind blow and we're like that was weird, but keep on moving. Other times, we turn back and then reconsider and hesitate. Other times, we just go, we follow, we listen, we enter the party and yeah sometimes it's filled with a bunch of strangers you will probably never see again, but in that moment God is there, the kingdom is alive and vibrant and present. The kingdom is all around us, the Holy Spirit is moving in every last corner of this world, but will we see it, will we feel it, will we take the invitation and say, yeah, I'm ready to party. **AMEN!!!**