

God's Party

A reflection offered by Jennifer A. Hudson at the Celtic Service for Justice, St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, Thursday, December 19, 2019

Revelation 4:9 to 5:5 and Matthew 25: 1-13

Being left out stings.

I remember attending a birthday party for one of the popular girls in our third grade class. We'd been playing a game of musical chairs and I'd won, fair and square. I was about to be handed my prize—a unicorn candy dispenser (which everyone coveted)—until one of my bullies called out, "Don't give her that. She doesn't deserve it. Give her this one instead." I was handed a dispenser shaped like roller skates. I took it and hung my head.

Yes, I had wanted the unicorn. But the bigger disappointment was this: I wasn't considered worthy of the unicorn. I didn't fit in. And I could never hope to be a member of the in crowd, even outside of school. So I walked myself to the adjacent dining room, sat down at the table, and cried. Alone. I wasn't expecting to be treated like a leper at a party.

I think that's why I wrestle with the ending of Jesus' parable. Why do the late bridesmaids get shut out of the party? How does a God of inclusion close the door to certain people and not to others? How does God determine who is worthy or unworthy of entry into the feast?

Maybe it's only God who is worthy, in the person of Jesus, as the passages from Revelation suggest. If that's the case, then why does anyone get let in at all?

Let's take a deeper look. We are told God "created all things, and by [God's] will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4: 11). Why would God—a God of love, as Scripture reveals—create if none of that creation was meant to be in relationship with God?

My friends, I think what Jesus is getting at in this parable is simple—in order to be "in" with God, to be included in the *Kindom* of Heaven, we need to be prepared. We need to be open. We must choose love.

The wise bridesmaids of Jesus' parable were equipped with oil flasks for their lamps. What's the symbolism? Well, traditionally, it would be read as the in-

dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We might read the lamp as a metaphor for the heart, the oil as the fueling passion, and the flame to be kindled as love. If we think of it this way, the bridesmaids gained entry to the banquet because their hearts were prepared for love. They were ready to welcome and be welcomed.

The kind of worthiness and preparation God is asking of us is a heart that burns with as much love for God and each other as God has for us. The choice is ours. When mutual love is present no one is excluded from the party.

So get your oil. Kindle your heart's flame. Welcome God as much as God welcomes you. You'll receive a far better prize than any candy-filled toy or popularity. You'll receive lavish, unconditional love. And that's worth celebrating!